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## **Reflections on *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility***

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## Foreword

In 1703, a book appeared written by John Baptist de La Salle for the “use of the Christian Schools.” It was a book on good manners, on politeness, a schoolbook similar to many others on the same subject that had, for a century and a half, been being published in France and elsewhere. It was printed in a quaint script customarily used in such schoolbooks and known, for that reason, as “civility script.” It was thought that, by this means, pupils would learn both good manners and how to decipher the writing formerly used in legal manuscripts. We know, from his biographers, that De La Salle went to great pains to produce this book – the one, we are told, on which he spent more time than on any other. The result was a book that became widely known in the eighteenth century.

If there is any justification needed to explain this short study of De La Salle’s *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*,<sup>3</sup> written as it is on the occasion of the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools,<sup>4</sup> it may be found in these three quotations from [Institute historian] Georges Rigault’s booklet published in 1951 for the tercentenary of De La Salle’s birth:

[De La Salle] put a little of himself into his book entitled *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility* . . .

This work possesses a value in itself; it bears the mark of his own profound thought . . .

What is expounded with such clarity in this book could be called a “humanism” that is born of the gospel . . .

Only a reading of the original text, as published in *Cahiers lasalliens 19*,<sup>5</sup> can convey the full flavor of the work. This short study can only try to give some idea of the “Christian humanism” of their Founder to the English-speaking Brothers<sup>6</sup> and enable them to perceive those little bits of himself that De La Salle reveals in his book on “civility.” It is this rather than the archaic details of seventeenth-century French etiquette that still make this book interesting today.

The book, as written by De La Salle and published in 1703, contains two parts: the first comprising fourteen short sections and the second comprising ten longer chapters, each divided into sub-divisions. The present writer has made an arbitrary selection of quotations from the book, but one that he hopes will be adequate to give some idea of the full work. The interested reader seeking the balance of the whole book is referred to the text in *Cahiers lasalliens*.<sup>7</sup>

Since De La Salle’s *Decorum & Civility* (as the book will be referred to subsequently) is, in the words of Georges Rigault, a “key document of our civilization,” it has been considered desirable to situate De La Salle’s book in relation to similar works that preceded his and also to illustrate his comments on good behavior by reference to the social history of his time.

This method will help to show De La Salle as a man immersed in his own time and as a man transcending time, how his spirituality pierces through and enlivens every one of his thoughts

and judgments, a spirituality as valid now as it was three centuries ago and which is the special heritage of all his Brothers, or as De La Salle himself said in the preface to this book, of “all true Christians.”

In order not to burden the text with numerous reference numbers, the latter have been omitted.<sup>8</sup> Special mention, however, must be made of the great debt owed to Brother Albert Valentin, whose Critical Edition in 1956 of the *Règles de la Bienséance et de la Civilité Chrétienne*<sup>9</sup> and other articles form the substratum of the present study.

Brother Edwin McCarthy, FSC  
District of London  
1984

## Chapter One: Introduction

There is perhaps no writing of John Baptist de La Salle so little known to the Brothers as the one commonly referred to as *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*. Yet, it is the one of all of his books that has had the widest reading public, so wide in fact that it has been described as a “best seller.” Published in 1703, it has been republished or re-edited some 176 times, 36 times in the eighteenth century alone, an average of once every three years. To the historian, but more particularly to the Brother of today, interested, even curious about the life and times of the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, this book has a special interest. It is, first of all, a book that is quite different in its scope from the better-known spiritual and educational writings of De La Salle. It seems, at first glance, to deal entirely with secular matters, with how to get on and how to succeed in the world. For the Brother, who is perhaps more familiar with De La Salle’s warnings about “the world” and its spirit, this comes as something of a surprise. Furthermore, this is the one book of De La Salle’s where he reveals himself as a “man of the world,” his world, that of France in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a period that is almost identical with the reign of Louis XIV, the so called Sun King, a reign that is illustrious for the many great minds that contributed to its glory: Racine, Molière, Pascal, Bossuet. And we must not forget that De La Salle lived on well into the eighteenth century, the century of the “philosophes”; and that for the last twenty-five years of his life, he was a contemporary of Voltaire, that future enemy of the Brothers.

And yet this is a book that, perhaps even more than others, enables us to understand De La Salle’s view of the world and of life, his view of faith, and his ability to see God and his will in all things. Georges Rigault sees it as a book in which De La Salle left a “little of himself.” To read the book is of interest if only to try to spot these little autobiographical snippets, these occasional glimpses into De La Salle’s personality.

One purpose of this short study of his book will be to try to see why he wrote it. Lessons on “civility” were not uncommon in seventeenth-century French schools. The anonymous author of *Escole Paroissiale*,<sup>10</sup> which was first published in 1654 and which Georges Rigault sees as the basis for De La Salle’s own *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*,<sup>11</sup> mentions “civility” as one of the subjects to be taught in school. To say that De La Salle wrote his *Decorum & Civility* as a “reader” for school children does not explain why he chose this particular form; and to say that he wrote it to teach good manners to poor children does not explain the length of the book, not its wealth of detail, often minute, on the ways of the aristocracy (why, for instance, in a “reader” intended for the classroom in schools for the poor, he included sections on how to enter the houses of the great, how to make ceremonial bows, when and how to carry a sword, how to visit and receive visits, how to entertain at dinner, or how to deal with the cutlery and the meats that one would only find in the houses of the rich).

Rigault sees this book as expressing a “humanism born of the gospel,” a humanism that stands revealed in De La Salle’s *Decorum & Civility*. This insight into his view of the world and of God’s work in the world raises interesting questions, and perhaps suggests answers, concerning De La Salle’s views on education and its effects on society. De La Salle’s other books are written within the mainstream of seventeenth-century French spirituality. In this particular book, he is in an even broader mainstream of seventeenth-century thought, one in which he finds himself in

company with other great Christian humanists of the period. Francis de Sales<sup>12</sup> and Vincent de Paul<sup>13</sup> would have thoroughly approved of John Baptist de La Salle's well-known words: "Make no distinction between the affairs of your occupational duties and the affair of your salvation."<sup>14</sup> They were all at one in the conviction that the Christian can and must be able to find God in the society in which he finds himself and that he can and must, through his outlook of faith and his work for others, sanctify himself by elevating the most mundane matters to "actions worthy of a Christian."

## Chapter Two: A Century of Books on Polite Living

Books on good manners, politeness, and courtliness were not unknown in the seventeenth century. On the contrary, it is surprising how many books on this subject had been published since Erasmus<sup>15</sup> first popularized this minor genre with his treatise *De Civilitate Morum Puerilium*,<sup>16</sup> published in 1530 and written for the son of the Prince of Veere. In France alone, several dozen books on politeness were published between 1600 and 1660, many of them translations of, or inspired by, Erasmus' book. Like his, these books deal with two kinds of civility: basic "good manners" for the instruction of children and, at a different level, the social conventions that needed to be known if a young person was to succeed in the world of the Renaissance Courts. By the seventeenth century, the phrase "civilité puérile," from the title of Erasmus' book, had become a cliché used to describe someone who had made a social "gaffe": "Il n'a pas lu sa civilité puérile."<sup>17</sup> "He does not know his children's *Civility*."

These early treatises on manners and customs surprise the modern reader, perhaps even embarrass or shock him by the simplicity, the bluntness, the crudeness with which they refer to matters, to bodily functions in a way we would consider indelicate. As the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries progress, what has been called the "growing threshold of embarrassment" can be noted in the wording and subject matter of the various books on civility or in subsequent editions of the same book. This is particularly noticeable in the re-editions of De La Salle's *Decorum & Civility* published by the Brothers of the Christian Schools throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is sufficient to note here that De la Salle writes without embarrassment, but with tactfulness of all such matters.

Erasmus treats in detail of such matters as spitting, sneezing, laughing, coughing, cleanliness of teeth, cleanliness from fleas and lice – "one does not scratch one's head in public." He describes how to stand, walk, bow . . . and gives interesting details on sixteenth-century meals and table manners. The use of the fork is mentioned, but it is assumed that most people will still be using their fingers to eat, helping themselves from a common pot. This gives rise to details of "good manners" which we might find revolting: how to help oneself from the pot, how not to put back into the common dish food half eaten, etc. One of the functions given to the young was the carving of meat; and this art is given some prominence by Erasmus, as it will nearly two hundred years later by De La Salle.

But Erasmus' book is of interest for another reason. It sets the tone of many of the subsequent books on polite living. It introduces a philosophical, or rather a spiritual, dimension, a reason for urbanity other than convenience or expediency.

Erasmus broadens the whole subject of politeness from a knowledge of “good” manners to respect for God – in his Church and, by implication, in people.

One can say that De La Salle will reverse this method. Instead of justifying the rules of polite living by a social or religious philosophy, he will start from an ideal of Christian living and will repeat almost on every page that the only true motive for the consideration given to others is one that will be basic to his whole attitude to life: the presence of a personal God. It is this aspect that makes an acquaintance with De La Salle’s *Civility* worthwhile.

The book that perhaps had most influence on the French seventeenth century was not that of Erasmus but one published by an Italian in Venice in 1558, with a French translation in an edition published in five languages in 1609. This was *Il Galateo* by the Italian poet Giovanni della Casa.<sup>18</sup> It was longer and more complete than *De Civilitate* by Erasmus; it was less noble in tone, more detailed and more practical in its application. Its fundamental principle of respect for others is one that will dominate most treatises of the seventeenth century: “You must arrange and adjust your ways of behaving, not according to your fancy, but according to the pleasure of those with whom you are conversing . . . and this must be done with discretion . . .”

Moderation is to be observed in all things. Clothes, for instance, must be in accordance with one’s age and position in life: “. . . a man<sup>19</sup> must study himself to come as close as he can to the manner of dressing of other citizens and allow himself to be borne along by custom even though it might be less convenient or attractive than older ways . . .” Della Casa examines at length the subject of conversation: “Refinement in speaking consists in the sound and pronunciation of words or else in their meaning . . .” One should not speak before having formulated in one’s mind what one intends to say so that “speech may be a birth not an abortion.”

Beauty resides in proportion and in unity: “a well-dressed woman washing linen would be an ugly sight for there would seem to be two women in her . . . Above all, we must look for measure and for balance: to do good is not sufficient; we must do good gracefully.” “This good grace is nothing other than a kind of illumination that comes from the beauty of the way things are assembled.” So *Il Galateo* gives a minute description of the things one must avoid because they are ugly in all the details of daily living: dressing, coughing, sneezing, blowing one’s nose (the handkerchief is now becoming a thing of practical use). One should not examine one’s handkerchief “as though pearls or rubies had fallen from one’s nose.” One should not use the table napkin to wipe away the sweat caused by one’s inordinate haste to eat as much as possible.

Adaptations of *Il Galateo* were numerous. The Jesuits published *Bienséance de la Conversation* at Rouen in 1618, dedicated to the “most noble and most flourishing youth of the boarding school of the same Company at Pont-à-Mousson.” The preface of that work states that the book was an imitation from the Italian and that a translation into Latin had been added to make it available to an even greater number of people. The Jesuits, it has been suggested, were alone in a period of great coarseness in manners in trying to teach good behavior and civilized living and in placing more emphasis on education than on mere instruction.

To the moderns, the rules of good manners given by the Jesuits for their “noble pupils” seem elementary in their crudeness. And yet at the end of the century, we shall find De La Salle

reiterating the same warnings, but this time for the children of the poor and for urchins on the streets. “One must neither spit too far nor toward one’s companions; if the phlegm is large, one must try to step on it; one must not spit from a window into the street, nor into the fire, nor into the hand-basin, nor in any other place where one is unable to step on the spittle.” “Clothes will be simple and ordinary.” “Do not dress up like a woman.”<sup>20</sup>

As will occur later with De La Salle, detailed instructions are given by the Jesuits concerning the most honorable places in a room: “In France, the seat nearest the wall is the most distinguished, the right hand one when there are two persons, the middle when there are three.” Already there is this mixture of *civilité puérile* precepts for children on elementary behavior with minute ceremonial prescriptions of the courtly rituals of precedence and of worldly savoir-faire. As with De La Salle, one of the longer sections was the one on table manners, clearly a major problem in a rambunctious and gluttonous age.

Bones and shells must not be thrown under the table; but if one cannot chew a piece of meat, one can quietly throw it behind one on the floor. The same may be done with liquids, provided one turns, if possible, to one side. One must neither clean one’s teeth with the napkin, nor rinse one’s mouth with wine and then spit it out. Only a glutton empties his plate; one should leave a little food on it. The fork and soup spoon are now recommended for more general use, but there are still references to the cleaning of greasy fingers. Most of these “rules” remain within the area of *civilité puerile*, of basic manners for children rather than in the area of good breeding. An appendix was added in the Pont-à-Mousson edition touching on “les gentilleses et courtoisies françaises”<sup>21</sup> because such matters of noble and courteous living are so necessary that a young man who would ignore them would find himself unable to do the right thing in society and would be laughed at. Details are then given on how to carve and how to eat different kinds of fruit and other foods. All these prescriptions will be repeated in De La Salle’s *Decorum & Civility*.

Various forces gave impetus toward this greater concern for manners and acceptable social behavior. The early driving force was undoubtedly the renaissance court. It became important for the man who wished to shine, or even to survive, in the brilliant new courts of the renaissance monarchs and princes to know his way about the growing maze of court etiquette. *Il Cortegiano* of Castiglione, published in 1528, led the way.<sup>22</sup> It was followed rapidly in popularity by Guazzo’s *Civile Conversazione*<sup>23</sup> and Della Casa’s *Il Galateo*, all soon translated from Italian into French. As with Erasmus’ *Civilité Puérile*, “savoir le courtisan” became a cliché in French for a man of the world.

None of these books was, of course, entirely original in its ideas. Their ancestry can be traced back to the classical authors of antiquity, especially to Cicero’s *De Officiis*.<sup>24</sup> Everyone agreed that the proper function of a gentleman was warfare and the military arts; but now it began to be said that he should also be a man of culture able to converse easily on any and every topic, turning an agreeable phrase and writing charming verse.

Erasmus had suggested that the nobleman should be learned, a comment that recalled from the poet Malherbe<sup>25</sup> the tart remark that politeness does not go with erudition. However, other forces were at work. Society ladies became socially influential. To their salons, men of culture and

agreeable conversation were invited to discuss philosophy, poetry, love, and novels, while the great lady reclined in an alcove surrounded by her admirers. The result was the emergence and sharpening of the concept of the “honnête homme,” the perfect gentleman. In De La Salle’s *Decorum & Civility*, as in other works of the period, the terms “honnête homme” and “honnêteté” recur continually, together with their oppositions, “il n’est pas honnête” or “malhonnête.”

The *Dictionnaire de l’Académie* of 1694 describes the “honnête homme” as one possessing all those agreeable qualities a man can have in social life or again as a man in whom one sees only agreeable qualities and worldly manners. “Civilité” or the practice of “honnêteté” became the means by which the deficiencies or roughness of nature would be remedied. Nature no longer appears to be necessarily equated with politeness. The brutality of the Wars of Religion<sup>26</sup> and the civil wars of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries had shown all too clearly what untamed nature could do.

The book that became the *vade mecum* of the seventeenth century was Nicolas Faret’s *L’Honneste Homme ou L’Art de plaire a la Court*, which appeared in 1630.<sup>27</sup> Faret’s perfect gentleman and successful courtier was also a good man – “un homme vertueux”<sup>28</sup> – seemingly a rare occurrence, for it was said about one archbishop of Rheims that he was a “courtier,” that is to say “a coward and a flatterer.” The courtier will preferably be of noble birth although Faret, himself a successful courtier, was the son of a rope-maker; he must be well-built and handsome, able to joust, to play the lute and the guitar, to wrestle, to shoot straight, all pastimes that were not so much “honnêtes” as useful. But the perfect gentleman will do all these things naturally and gracefully as though born to them. The secret is to show a certain nonchalance that will hide effort. As for his mind, Faret wishes his courtier to know mathematics, history, politics, economics, ethics, the classical languages, Italian and Spanish; and he should not be ignorant of painting, sculpture, and music. But again all this needs to be accomplished with every appearance of naturalness and not a trace of erudition. Faret, the Christian, insists on the identity of virtue with the manners of the perfect courtier. However, it will be the work of Francis de Sales to show how the courtier can, in fact, be a perfect Christian.

Indeed, the question became one as to whether or not the “honnête homme” could be a good man. The early optimism of the renaissance that good manners were but an extension of nature had been changed into the conviction that nature needed to be improved upon by the rules of politeness. But for some, the “honnête homme” was essentially the courtier, the “gallant.” Several well-known courtiers became the epitomes of the “honnête homme,” among them Charles de Saint-Évremond<sup>29</sup> who thought that “honnête homme” and good morals scarcely “go together.” The satirist La Bruyère<sup>30</sup> remarked that a good man will also be a gentleman, but wryly added that every gentleman is not a good man. Chevalier de Méré,<sup>31</sup> who became the type of the perfect “honnête homme,” separated gentlemanliness from “galanterie”<sup>32</sup> but nonetheless thought that it would be difficult to be a genuine “honnête homme” unless “ladies were in it somewhere.”

Francis de Sales undertook to show that men could live in the world without being of the world, just as pearls can live in the sea “without taking a drop of sea water.” It had become a common place of the writers on politeness that religion was the foundation of all the virtues. Francis de

Sales set out to show in practice how that was so, not for the theologian, but for the ordinary man living in the world. Bousset<sup>33</sup> declared that Francis de Sales had brought devotion back into the world. Francis de Sales does not enter into any of the detailed prescriptions of courtliness that make up the “honnête homme.” His aim was, rather, to develop the Christian motives that lie behind civility. He does not ignore matters of fashion, of speech, and of dress: “I would like my devout man and woman to be the best dressed of the group, but the least affected and the least fussy.” He assumes that his reader is already well acquainted with “la civilité puérile,” with the elements of good manners; but he still occasionally finds it necessary to add a remark on good dress and offers the advice that one’s face must also be clean and “décrassée,” that is “free of dirt.”<sup>34</sup>

### Chapter Three: The Influence of Antoine de Courtin

The writer to whom De La Salle owed most for his book on politeness was neither Francis de Sales nor any of the preceding authors, but a gentleman from Auvergne named Antoine de Courtin. Courtin was born in Riom in 1622 and, like De La Salle, was from a legal family. Both his father and grandfather occupied legal offices under the crown. Courtin engaged for some time in a military career in the armies of the King of France. In 1645, he left for Sweden with the French Ambassador and, subsequently, he served under King Charles Gustavus of Sweden. In 1651, he was ennobled by Queen Christina, the philosopher Queen who had summoned Descartes to Stockholm in 1649 and whose peculiar working hours, it is sometimes believed, led to Descartes’ death in 1650. In 1656, Courtin returned to France to negotiate a Franco-Swedish alliance. In 1659, Louis XIV appointed him his “resident ambassador to the kings, princes, Hanseatic Towns of the North and the Baltic ports.” In 1668, he retired to France; and as his health no longer allowed him to pursue an active career, he spent his remaining years living quietly in Paris reading, meditating, and writing. It was during this period that he wrote his *Nouveau Traité de la Civilité qui se pratique en France parmi les honnêtes gens*.<sup>35</sup> He died in 1685.

Both in his life and by his books, Courtin typified the seventeenth-century gentleman, the “honnête homme.” A fervent Catholic, he was the kind of person Francis de Sales had in mind when writing of the “devout life”<sup>36</sup> and of the “love of God.”<sup>37</sup> A thinker, Courtin was deeply influenced by the main currents of seventeenth-century intellectual life: the individualism of the renaissance, its confidence in the powers of nature and reason, the renewal of classical philosophy and of Platonism, stoicism, epicureanism. Courtin was a faithful representative of neo-stoicism with its concern to establish an identity between the ethics of stoicism and the Christian moral law. From the perspective of this Christian stoicism, with its belief in the submission of the human will to the will of a personal God, Courtin was led to stress the need to combat the passions. Hence, his *Traité de la Jalousie* makes a detailed study of the passions. In this work, Courtin developed two elements of stoic philosophy: the insistence on self-control and a renewed trust in a “natural order of things.” To these he added the Christian virtue of humility. Courtin’s ethics became essentially the submission of human will to a natural order willed by God and the acceptance of constraint as part of that order, an acceptance that expressed itself in a struggle between body and soul in which constraint and self-control became the necessary conditions for moral greatness.

In his belief that it was both possible and right to give a Christian interpretation to ancient philosophy, indeed his attempt to show that the virtues of stoicism were fundamentally Christian, Courtin stood within the main streams of Catholic thought. The same process was taking place with other strands of ancient philosophical thought. Epicureanism had become the “libertinism” of the seventeenth century nourished with the (gentle) skepticism of Montaigne, a worldly “joie de vivre” tinged with licentiousness. It was the task of men like the Jesuits and Francis de Sales to try to show that the better qualities of humanism and of the worldly, social life could also be rendered “devout” and lead not away from, but toward, the love of God.

But battle lines were being drawn up. Irreligion was a practice openly exhibited. So too was public indecency, while superstition all too often passed for religion.

In his third part of the *Duties of a Christian before God* – published in 1703 and at the same time as his *Decorum & Civility* – De La Salle refers to the superstitious practices surrounding the celebration of the feast of his patron, John the Baptist. Bonfires were lit outside the churches as a sign of “the joy that the Church takes in the birth of this saint,” but then superstitious practices then took place which were “unworthy of a Christian”: “throwing into the fire plants gathered before noon or while still fasting and then preserving the embers as though they possessed some power of their own....” In another chapter of the same book, De La Salle condemns Carnival, which took place before Lent and which continued for the same length of time as Lent, because he saw it, and especially the carousing and reveling of the three days before Ash Wednesday, as a deliberate parody and mockery of the Christian celebration of the forty days of Lent and particularly of the last three days of Holy Week.

The strong arm of the absolute monarch was theoretically more than able to crush untoward behavior in individuals, but it was powerless against the growing swell of public irreligion. By the end of the seventeenth century, it had become safe, for the great at least, openly to profess atheism.

Against the attempts of the Catholic humanists – the Jesuits, Francis de Sales, and others – to Christianize the profane, other groups – both in the Catholic and Protestant churches – were totally hostile to what they saw as an accommodation between God and mammon. They would oblige those who lived in the world to choose between God and the world. In France, the Jansenists, their case brilliantly and articulated by Pascal, easily turned the tables on the Jesuits, using the weapon of ridicule to discredit “molinism” and, hence, all attempts to assign basic dignity and value to a nature bereft of God’s grace, a grace that was moreover reserved for the few and then only in alienation from the secular.

These theological debates took place against the background of a new philosophy. In 1639, René Descartes published his *Discours de la Méthode*, followed in 1649 by his *Traité des Passions de l’Âme*. For Descartes, the passions were brutal instincts that had their origin in the body. The soul must control them by reason and the will. Reason was supreme provided it was used correctly, according to the rules.

The new vogue of Cartesianism reached its summit in the 1660s when Courtin was busy with his duties as extraordinary royal ambassador. Courtin was conquered by the new philosophy,

although he was perhaps more impressed by its traditional Aristotelian elements than by its revolutionary aspects. His books are pervaded with a spirit of Cartesian rationalism. Reason has to be regarded as a expression of God's will.

This, then, was the man whose *Nouveau Traité de la Civilité* that was published in 1671, as has been shown by Brother Albert Valentin, was studied by De La Salle and followed closely for his own *Decorum & Civility*. A man from a family of lawyers, a soldier, a perfect example of the "honnête homme," a distinguished ambassador, an honored and respected courtier, a successful man of affairs, a fervent Catholic who combined the devout humanism of Francis de Sales with the rationalism of Descartes, but a man who in his writings shows himself to be almost totally aloof from the blemish of Jansenism.

It has already been noticed how a tradition of French writings on politeness and worldly manners had developed in the seventeenth century, inspired in most cases from Italian sources, among them *Il Galateo* of Della Casa. Two main tendencies are to be found among them that are traceable back to Erasmus' *De Civilitate Morum Puerilium*: the description of basic rules of good behavior and the extension of these rules to a consideration of some philosophy of life.

Besides making use of the customary sources, Courtin had also liberally plagiarized another work to which he himself pays generous tribute, Pierre Nicole's *De l'éducation d'un Prince* that was published in 1670.<sup>38</sup> What attracted Courtin especially to Nicole's three-volume work was this philosophical outlook that inspired Nicole's thinking, the conviction that Christian civility is not merely a matter of knowing the right rules. It is an expression of a spiritual outlook, an exercise in Christian charity. In his preface to his own book on civility, Courtin declares that he is not simply repeating what Nicole has already said. His intention is to give detailed prescriptions concerning good manners, to which Nicole had already supplied the spiritual foundation. In this sense, he claims, his work is complementary to that of Nicole. He defines politeness as "la modestie et l'honnêteté que chacun doit garder selon sa condition" (the self-control and good manners that each must have according to his position). "Modestie" he identifies with "l'humilité." This "self-control . . . is nothing else than . . . humility." Thus, Courtin brings the self-restraint needed for the acceptance and practice of socially acceptable standards of behavior back to the Christian virtue of humility, the admission of one's position with regard to God and also to one's fellow men, that is one's state of life. This was not an original suggestion, but Courtin goes further than his predecessors; and in his sincere spirit of Christianity, he sees the behavior of the genuine "honnête homme" as impregnated with the highest Christian idealism. This was an aspect of his work that would have found an instant positive response in his reader, De La Salle.

A further aspect of Courtin's treatment of social manners that will appear in De La Salle's book on *Decorum & Civility* is his understanding of the relativity and transiency of the rules of politeness. Actions must be adapted to various situations: age, position, rank, time, or place. In his preface, Courtin tells us that the rules he is giving refer only to a French Christian of the seventeenth century. In such a society, civility consisted in knowing the exact relationship a person held to those around him, for social life involved a social hierarchy reaching from the lowest and the most insignificant to the king. Above the king, there was only God. Louis' belief

in his special relationship with God is summed up in the words attributed to him after the defeat of the French at Ramillies: “God seems to have forgotten all that I have done for him.”<sup>39</sup>

At Versailles, it was customary for the courtiers to attend Mass with the king; but whereas Louis XIV in his box, faced the altar, his court stood with their backs to the altar facing the king. (This was not in Mansart’s beautiful Gothic chapel admired by present-day visitors to Versailles, which was completed only five years before the king’s death, but in a temporary chapel, at present divided into two rooms.)

Social life in such a society involved a constant assessment of one’s standing relative to that of the people one encountered, followed by the appropriate response to one’s assessment. Propriety consisted in knowing at all times what was appropriate or proper to the occasion, to the person. The most important thing was to discern correctly the person of superior rank to oneself and to show that person the exact degree of required politeness – neither too much nor too little. But the truly great showed politeness also to their inferiors. Louis XIV never passed by a charwoman at Versailles without raising his hat to her, but the exact extent to which his hat was raised was carefully calculated and increased with the dignity of the person he met.

But although the man of quality might know from birth the rules of precedence and the appropriate response – and even then some might make mistakes (“I see,” said Louis XIV icily to his brother who had put his hand to a dish before the king, “that your hand is no better controlled than your tongue.”) – how was one to discover that, on encountering the royal dinner on its long journey from the kitchens to the table, one had to bow low, sweep the ground with the plume of one’s hat, and say aloud and reverently “La viande du Roi?” Books on etiquette were clearly essential for most people and especially for those who aspired to rise socially.

In addition to this constant element of hierarchy, there was the variable of fashion. The source of fashion was the court; and, therefore, respect for hierarchy required that fashion be followed. Courtin’s Cartesian logic deserts him when he treats of fashion. Fashion, he says, is an absolute mistress to which reason must give way; clothing must be adapted to her good pleasure under pain of abandoning society. The one over-riding purpose is to be pleasing to others; and the golden rule in all things is moderation, balance, and the acceptance of what was regarded as the natural order.

#### **Chapter Four: An Audience for De La Salle’s *Decorum & Civility***

Who were the readers of these numerous books on civility? Many of them, starting from Erasmus’ book, were written ostensibly for the education of princes and noblemen and read in schools and colleges<sup>40</sup> (such as the Jesuit colleges, for the use of “their noble youth”). The title page of De La Salle’s *Decorum & Civility* says that the book was written “for the use of the Christian schools.” At the time of the first edition of 1703, there could have been some 5,000 children being taught by the Brothers; but not all of them would have been capable of reading in *Decorum & Civility*. The 1715 edition adds the statement: “Very useful for the Education of Children and of those Persons who do not possess the Politeness of the World, nor of the French Language.” The publisher Jean-Baptiste Besongne of Rouen added his own introduction to the 1715 edition, addressing it to the Grand Chantre (Precentor) of the Metropolitan Church of Paris

and suggesting that it would prove useful to the “School of Masters and Mistresses under your control and even to those who teach in colleges.” For Besongne to suggest, only twelve years after the first appearance of De La Salle’s book, that it would be suitable not only for poor children but for the sons and daughters of the well-to-do and the nobility who frequented the colleges of the Jesuits, Oratorians, and Benedictines was an indication of its immediate success and its potentially wide appeal. To make such a suggestion to the class-conscious society of the early eighteenth century was either a sign of rashness on the part of the editor or an indication that the book was of interest to a wider segment of the public. It has been said that with the publication of De La Salle’s *Decorum & Civility* in 1703 civility passed to the world of the middle class.

The number of editions De La Salle’s book went through in the eighteenth century is a good indication that it was widely read. In the lifetime of the Founder, from the first edition of 1703 to the time of his death in 1719, there were at least four and possibly five editions. The eighteenth century saw some thirty-six editions or reprints. Three years after the Founder’s death, there appeared an edition “for the use of the Christian Schools for girls,” published at the request of Canon Roland’s Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus.<sup>41</sup> From 1722, De La Salle’s book appeared with the word “children” replaced by “young people.” Various indications in the text make clear that De La Salle had in mind a wider public than that of the school: first of all, the teachers themselves,<sup>42</sup> then the children’s parents, other priests, and young people training for the priesthood. For example, “. . . the fashion [for ecclesiastics] must be to have an appearance and clothes that conform to those ecclesiastics who are most pious and regular in their conduct, following in this the advice of Saint Paul, not to conform oneself to the world.”<sup>43</sup>

De La Salle’s elaborate description of the way one must enter the house of the great could well have served as a *vade mecum* for ambassadors. Details concerning the appropriate manner in which the sword should be worn and what to do with it at table were not likely to be of any use to the poor clientele of De La Salle’s schools. He himself warns that it would be quite unbecoming for a tradesman to wear a sword at his side.<sup>44</sup>

The title of De La Salle’s book on civility was chosen with care: *Les Règles de la Bienséance et de la Civilité Chrétienne*. “Bienséance,” in the seventeenth century, meant appropriateness. It referred to the correctness or rightness of what is said or done according to the age, sex, time, and place. It came from the verb “seoir,” defined as a verb that referred to what was appropriate to a person, to his situation in life, to the place, to the time. “Politeness” or “propriety,” rather than decorum, will generally be used in this study as its English equivalent. “Bienséance” was something that concerned the individual and the individual’s ability to discern what was fitting in any particular circumstance. “Civilité,” on the other hand, refers to the “civilitas,” the city, to the civic virtues, to “urbanity,” to whatever is required by polite society, to the ability to know or learn accepted standards of social intercourse.

Socially accepted behavior is something in constant evolution. For example, the early treatises on civility assumed that people would be using their fingers to eat and to extract food from a common dish. Rules of civility explained how to help oneself from the common pot, how to clean greasy fingers or how to throw food (discretely) on the floor. By the time De La Salle wrote, forks, for instance, were in common use, although from his insistence that they must

“necessarily” be used and from his occasional comments on how to wipe greasy fingers it is evident that people still did without them.

De La Salle sets out unambiguously, and from the start, his own point of view: “It is a surprising thing that most Christians regard propriety (‘bienséance’) and civility only as a purely human and worldly quality . . . and not as a virtue that related to God, to the neighbor, and to oneself.” He goes on to say that “this shows how little Christianity there is in the world and how few people there are who live and behave according to the mind of Jesus Christ.”<sup>45</sup>

The Founder had no illusions about the realities behind the tinsel glitter of the Sun-King’s reign. He writes to Brother Gabriel Drolin in Rome about “these unhappy times” and refers, in his *Meditation for the Feast of Saint Nicholas*, to “a time as corrupt as ours.”<sup>46</sup> The *Common Rules* of 1705<sup>47</sup> sees the principal result of the foundation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools as the prevention of the “disorders” that are so common among the children of the artisans and the poor. And, indeed, not only among the poor. Superstition, the practice of magic, and witchcraft were widespread, even reaching up to and involving the highest circles in the land, the immediate entourage of Louis XIV himself. The whole of France, and especially the court, had been shaken in 1676 by the discovery of witchcraft, poison, philters, black Masses, and murder in high circles. The Marquise de Brinvilliers<sup>48</sup> paid the supreme penalty. Her body was burned, and the ashes scattered in the wind; but then the police investigation was halted on orders from the highest level, but not before there had been statements from suspects that the very family of the king was involved.

It was certainly not to create a false front of agreeable behavior that De La Salle spent so much time on the composition of his book on civility, of all his books the one, we are told, on which he worked hardest. Nor was his expression of regard for Christian values merely a repetition of the commonplaces of some of his predecessors or even of the deeply felt convictions of Antoine de Courtin or of the anonymous author of the *Treatise on Civility* published in Lyons and used by Demia’s schools,<sup>49</sup> both of whose works inspired De La Salle in the composition of his own *Decorum & Civility*.

De La Salle goes further. We must live by the spirit of Jesus Christ; we must conduct ourselves in all things by this same spirit. Like Francis de Sales and in contrast to the Jansenists, De La Salle believes that it is possible – although regretfully all too rare in his own day – to sanctify the profane, to fulfill God’s will in all the events of life. But whereas Courtin might give a Christian foundation to civility, turning stoic ethics into Christian values, De La Salle says in his preface, quoting Saint Paul, that “there is not one [of your actions] which should not be done through purely Christian motives, and thus all our exterior actions, which are the only ones that can be governed by politeness (bienséance), must always possess and bear in faith the mark of virtue.”

The very title of De La Salle’s book proclaims its difference from its many predecessors in the seventeenth century. It includes the word “Christian.” In the French, the word is written in the singular and could, therefore, appear to apply only to its immediate antecedent, “civility” – *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility* – but in seventeenth-century usage, it was customary to make a word agree grammatically with the immediate antecedent, even when it referred to several nouns. Whatever the grammatical niceties in this case, there is no doubt that in De La

Salle's view, the only politeness and the only civility, the only good manners, the only urbanity worthy of a Christian were necessarily Christian.

The result of this spiritual insight is that De La Salle can never examine simply the mere details of protocol in any form of social activity, the mere rules of the game of life, the laws of "lifemanship" as played in the seventeenth century. Still less is he concerned merely to provide a ready-made guide to the ladder of social advancement. De La Salle wrote at a time of greater social mobility than might be imagined from a consideration of the formalism of life and the formidable structure of the social hierarchy. Historically, his book on civility is of interest as it represents the spreading of courtly manners to a broader strata of society and, in fact, has been regarded by historians as one of the vehicles for that broadening. One of the intriguing questions raised by his book is to know whether he had any deliberate intentions of social reform, a question that is outside the scope of this monograph.

What one can affirm with certainty is that the whole of De La Salle's *Decorum & Civility* has a spiritual purpose and a strong moral outlook. For De La Salle, the motivation for civility is not man's relationship with other men but his relationship with God. This it is, he says in the preface, which will enable us "to distinguish as one ought Christian politeness and civility from that which is purely human and almost pagan." In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the period of courtly aristocracies, it was from without that man perceived the need to impose restraints on his natural inclinations and passions and to express this restraint through a stylized form of behavior. Basic to this behavior was a respect "due" to superiors, a respect that could be based on consideration of their genuine human worth, on fear of their power, or simply on acceptance of convention, of the pattern of an established society.

De La Salle does not minimize respect due to superiors. He explains in great detail how this is to be shown in every event of life. But he stresses that the only true motive for showing such regard in one's actions and behavior must be a spiritual one: the presence of God in all people. He tells parents in the preface that they should not scold their children for their bad behavior simply because such behavior will cause them to be disliked and, therefore, will lessen their chances of success in life. To do so, he says, will inspire children with the spirit of the world and deprive them of the spirit of the gospel. "When they wish to inculcate these exterior practices that concern good manners and restraint, they must be careful to do so for the sole motive of the presence of God . . . [and] because the Lord is near."

And, again, he says, "They will urge them [children] to give these expressions of goodwill, honor, and respect only as to members of Jesus Christ and to living temples of the Holy Spirit."

This is the true Christian spirit. Between this and cap-touching deference to one's "betters" is an abyss. There is more to it still. Respect for others, servants as well as superiors, is not merely a sign that one respects God's creation. It is a grace-giving act that draws us near to God himself. "If all Christians put themselves in the position of giving signs of goodwill, esteem, and respect only with these views and for motives of this nature, they will sanctify through this means all their actions."<sup>50</sup>

This puts a new light on all the myriad rules that De La Salle will repeat in his book about the various aspects of social intercourse. This statement of De La Salle should be remembered all the time one is reading his book for then one will realize that he is using the social conventions of his time not as absolutes (he has already assured us of this), not even as means in their own right but as ways in which the true follower of Christ both signifies his realization of God's presence in all life and through this insight, this sense of the divine, "sanctifies himself."

De La Salle repeats this theological insight in greater detail to his Brothers in his spiritual writings. He establishes very clearly a "non-distinction" between the search for [evangelical] perfection and the Brother's professional responsibilities. Life had a dynamic unity to be found only in the contemplation of God in and through the events of life. In his *Decorum & Civility*, De La Salle is writing not for religious<sup>51</sup> but for the ordinary Christian or rather for the genuine followers of Christ as distinct from those who are "Christian" in name only, who as he suggests to us are the majority of his fellow-countrymen.

God's sanctifying presence in oneself, in one's actions, and in all the events of life is the key to Lasallian spirituality and is the principle that gives meaning to this book written by a saint on the ways of the world. The details may be archaic, but it would be to misunderstand the purpose of this book if one were to see it merely as of antiquarian interest. De La Salle, one suspects, would have written a different sort of book for the jean-clad generation of today. What would not be changed, however, is his message.

### **Chapter Five: Part One of *Decorum & Civility***

De La Salle's definition of "bienséance" follows those common to the period:

Christian propriety (bienséance) is, therefore, a way of behaving that one reveals in one's speech and one's exterior actions, from a sentiment of measure (moderation), or of respect or of union and charity toward the neighbor, having regard to the time, the place, and the persons with whom one is conversing; and it is this propriety toward the neighbor which is specifically called civility.<sup>52</sup>

Propriety (politeness) is a quality that supposes good sense and a feel for order, for harmony. Directed toward the neighbor it is an expression of urbanity arising out of a sense of proportion and measure that leads to a desire for union. Although not entirely clear, De La Salle's definition is more meaningful than Courtin's rather vague comments in the preface of his own work: "Civility . . . is nothing more than the measure and the gentlemanliness that each must preserve in his words and in his action."

Politeness (bienséance) is nothing other than a certain gentlemanly measure or modesty ("pudeur") that should accompany all our actions. Courtin later says that to deduce the rules of true politeness, one has only to deduce correctly those of propriety, which is not a very enlightening remark.

The way in which one reveals one's sense of what is proper to any occasion will vary from one period to another, from one person to another, from one place to another. De La Salle, in

common with other writers on civility, accepts the relativity of the various manifestations of social control, of acceptable conduct. He says plainly that to retain outmoded ways of behavior would only make one “pass for an oddity, far from being considered as an urbane and refined person.”<sup>53</sup> Not only do customs vary from one period to another, “each nation has its own ways of politeness and civility that are special to it; so that what is unbecoming in one country is often regarded as civil and refined in another.” The quality of the person one addresses obviously merits consideration. One does not behave in the presence of the king in the same way as with one’s friends.

In all this, De La Salle shows himself a man of all times; but his next remark situates him firmly in his own century. The reference to behavior toward the sovereign leads naturally on from the seventeenth-century attitude to questions of superiority and outward signs by which this difference in social standing was given recognition. A peasant, for example, must give exteriorly more honor to his lord than would a craftsman who is not dependent on him; and this craftsman should show more respect to a lord than would another nobleman paying him a visit. Practically speaking, therefore, politeness and civility consist in certain outward practices of moderation and respect toward other people. Consequently, De La Salle declares that he will treat in his book of two things: first, the control that should be noticeable in the appearance and bearing of the different parts of the body; and secondly, the exterior marks of respect or of special regard that one ought to give in various actions of life to all those persons in whose presence one accomplishes them and with whom one might have dealings.

In Part One of his *Decorum & Civility* De La Salle repeats much of the “civilité puérile,” the advice on good manners for children to be found in Courtin and in the *Civility* of Lyon and current in most of the books on the subject since Erasmus’ first book on civility. Sometimes, De La Salle finds it difficult to restrict himself to what is “proper” and impinges on the area of urbanity or civility; but for the most part, this section deals with a very straightforward account of what would not be tolerated in personal behavior by polite people either then or now. He does so with a candor and simplicity of tone that is refreshingly devoid of embarrassment; but at the same time, he avoids the cruder expressions of his predecessors.

From the start, he develops a consistent point of view: an attitude of mildness and moderation; reasonableness, a classical dislike of excess and flourishes; the acceptance of custom; an acute understanding of human psychology.

For Brothers more used to the Founder’s spiritual writings on the religious life – on the “religious” and the “world” – it comes as something of a surprise to find this order reversed. But for De La Salle, everything has its place and everything is right in its own place. He advises “secular persons” that they should not act like “religious.” “Those who live in the world should not adopt too modest an air, for that would be more like a religious than a secular.”<sup>54</sup>

A secular person should not “keep his arms crossed when talking; that is a restraint which is proper to religious but is not fitting for seculars.”<sup>55</sup> “It is unsightly for persons of the world to hide their hands in their clothes . . . this would make them appear more like a religious than a secular.”<sup>56</sup>

To be natural, to act according to one's condition, to be moderate, is to act according to the "rules," the rules of nature. De La Salle advises against the excesses into which people might be led by their desire to shine in the world, but he does so with a mildness that is impressive.

One such issue was the use of makeup for men. According to writers of the time, it was not unknown for men to use beauty spots on their cheeks, to powder themselves, or to use white or rouge makeup. The *Civility of Lyon* (1685) is severe on this point and says bluntly that (for men) "to use makeup is to offend God and dishonor nature." De La Salle is equally clear, but milder in tone: "It is unbecoming and a sign of vanity as well as a thing which is not suitable for Christians, to put beauty spots on one's face and to use white and red makeup."

Later he says that the only red on a man's face should be the blush produced by the sight or sound of indecency.

Part One of De La Salle's *Decorum & Civility* also throws interesting light on the question: "who were the poor in De La Salle's schools?" Much of what he says comes from Courtin or the anonymous author of the *Lyon Civility*, which themselves repeat earlier treatises on the same subject. But De La Salle never repeats idly; he always has a reason. He regroups, he alters, he rearranges, he abbreviates, or he may repeat in full. In each case, it is certain that the final result is deliberate and a personal choice. If therefore we look at his chapters on such matters as cleanliness and personal habits, it becomes clear at once that De La Salle has in mind the children who came to his schools, children of no class, no manners, no social graces, in other words, snotty nosed little urchins with revolting habits.

In the chapter on the nose, this is what he says:

It is very impolite to have one's finger continually foraging in one's nose . . . It is vile to clean one's nose by rubbing one's bare hand under it, or to clean it against one's sleeve or one's clothes; and it is most improper to clean one's nose with two fingers and then to throw the filth on the ground and afterwards to wipe one's fingers on one's clothes, for one knows how unbecoming it is to see such filth on clothes which ought always to be clean, however poor they might be, because they are the adornment of a servant of God and a member of Jesus Christ.<sup>57</sup>

This quotation not only suggests the sort of children who frequented the Brothers' first schools, it also reveals De La Salle's method of rising at one step from the unvarnished truth about his little urchins to a conception of their innate dignity as "servants of God and members of Jesus Christ."

It is, of course, true that manners were still at what would appear to us as a fairly elementary stage. The elaborate court ritual might be one aspect of the great period of Louis XIV. Another was the absence of sanitation or the prevalent custom, almost the mania, of spitting. To this latter, De La Salle devotes almost the whole of the tenth chapter of *Decorum & Civility*. Whereas earlier treatises had assumed that the handkerchief was a rarity, kept more for show than for use, De La Salle tells his children – and other readers – that the handkerchief must be used when one wishes to spit in the presence of the "great" or in the church. He deplores the fact that "there is

no kitchen floor or even stable floor more filthy than that of the church, although this is the dwelling place and the house of God on earth.”<sup>58</sup>

The moderation of De La Salle, his classical restraint, his mildness are to be seen also in his details on the taking of snuff, on sneezing, and on washing.

From the manner in which the use of tobacco is treated in the books on civility consulted by De La Salle, such as Courtin and the Lyon *Civility*, it is clear that a fairly recent change had taken place in acceptable behavior regarding tobacco. Courtin in 1671 and the Lyon author in 1685 depict the taking of snuff as objectionable and a thing to be avoided. De La Salle in 1703 says:

It is a fairly common practice to take snuff; however, it is much better not to do so, especially when one is in company, and one must never do so in the presence of persons to whom one owes respect. It is very improper to chew it and to put the leaves in one’s nose, and it is not less improper to take it in a pipe. This is quite intolerable in the presence of ladies. If the custom of taking snuff is allowable for men, being so widely accepted through common use, this cannot be the case for women and, therefore, it is against propriety for them to use it.<sup>59</sup>

This extract is an excellent example of De La Salle’s re-using of the works of others, his adapting it to his own time and to accepted usage. The taking of snuff had become a “fairly accepted practice” by 1703 and, hence, had become acceptable in polite society, at least for men. Pipe smoking, on the other hand, was still not acceptable. De La Salle, therefore, prescribes the limits within which snuff might be taken, the rules of civility concerning snuff, and in so doing wanders, in Part One, from a description of good manners for children into the area of worldly civility.

The balance and moderation of the Founder’s attitude can also be seen in his comments on jewelry and the wearing of wigs.

It is sometimes the custom, especially for women of noble condition to wear pearls, diamonds, and precious stones hanging from their ears; it is, however, more modest and more Christian not to give the ears any ornament since it is through them that the word of God enters the mind and the heart . . .<sup>60</sup>

Later, in discussing fashion he reminds his women readers that the wearing of diamonds by middle class women would make her look as though she were trying to appear above herself.

As for wigs, the Founder’s views are equally balanced. The custom of wearing a wig had appeared under Louis XIII but had become the fashion only after 1674 when Louis XIV began to wear one. The period of De La Salle’s active life coincided with the maximum use of the wig, from 1675 to 1715, when the fashion extended to the middle class. Wigs could be very expensive and could also be very heavy on the head. However, De La Salle does not moralize on this subject; instead he gives some words of advice with only a hint of disapproval for the foppishness that was not unknown at the court of Louis XIV.

It is even more contrary to propriety to have an ill-combed wig than uncombed hair. That is why those who wear a wig must be particularly careful to keep it neat, because the hair of which it is made, having no support in itself, requires great care than natural hair to remain in a seemly condition. A wig is much more suitable and becoming for the wearer when it is of the same color as his own hair than when it is of a deeper or a lighter color. There are however some people who wear wigs with so many curls and so blond that they seem more like women than men. Although one must not be negligent with this sort of headwear when it is customary, it is nonetheless contrary to propriety and to a man's good sense, to spend a lot of time and take great pains to make it look becoming and well arranged.<sup>61</sup>

In speaking of washing, De La Salle also shows his judicious use of his predecessors' writings and his own more practical reflections on their wilder flights of fancy. According to the anonymous author of the *Lyon Civility*, a child "should wipe his face every morning with a white, clean cloth . . . washing with water harms the sight, causes toothache and catarrh, makes the face turn pale and become more susceptible to the cold in winter and to sunburn in summer." De La Salle obviously has doubts about the harmful effect of water on the eyes, teeth and nose, a common belief however at the time and one that is repeated in many of the books on civility. He merely says, "Cleanliness requires that one should wipe one's face every morning with a white cloth in order to rid it of dirt. It is not good to wash with water because that makes the face more susceptible to the cold in winter and to sunburn in summer."

One must remember that failure to wash with water was not due entirely to fanciful notions about the physical effects of water on the constitution but to the difficulty of attaining it. The people for whom De La Salle wrote his reader on civility lived mostly in tenements in crowded Paris streets. There would be no running water in any of these houses. There was none even in the magnificent palace the king had recently built at Versailles. The king himself did not wash with water; he rubbed oil over his face to remove the dirt of the day. The Brothers' *Common Rules* of 1705 tells the Brothers to rise, dress, and make their beds in a quarter of an hour and then to assemble fully dressed in the common room to "clean themselves and to comb their hair."

On sneezing, the *Lyon Civility* repeats medical traditions of doubtful value. Sneezing was regarded as a sacred action and so to be blessed because it allowed the evil humors of the body to escape. "The one who sneezes has his brain overloaded and yet has enough strength to preserve himself from the evil humors . . . by the effort he makes in sneezing . . . which is why this wind is called sacred by the writers and is always accompanied by some good wish . . ." De La Salle omits all this medical mumbo-jumbo, bordering on superstition, and contents himself with outlining the "rules" customary in polite society when someone sneezes. "One does not say 'God bless you' . . . one should, without saying anything, raise one's hat and bow deeply, sweeping one's hat to the ground if the person who sneezes is superior."

De La Salle, a townsman, shares the common attitude of the middle and upper class toward peasants and servants. Vulgar actions or a thick, clumsy pronunciation, are "typical of the behavior of peasants." The *Lyon Civility* is rich in comparison with the lower classes, many of them graphic, which De La Salle usually omits in transcribing sentences into his own work.

Occasionally, he retains a few. For example, it is rude for a child to make faces, to “squint with one eye closed like a crossbowman aiming at a target.” To walk with one’s arms behind one’s back is a “vulgarity worthy of a street porter.” It is not urbane to place one’s hands on one’s hips, “like women scolding other women.” When walking, one should not swing the shoulders from one side to the other, “like the pendulum of the clock.” Courtin frequently develops these similes into entertaining little scenes of daily life, but then he is writing for a cultured public, not for the children of the poor who attend the Christian schools. Courtin tells his readers not to wave their arms about when talking and illustrates this with reference to Trivelin, one of the characters of the Italian *Commedia dell’Arte*. De La Salle omits this allusion and simply says that in speaking one does not make gestures.

When seated, one should not stamp one’s foot on the floor, “as horses do.” Nor should one jump when walking “as though one were dancing.” As for servants, occasional references show the low opinion the seventeenth-century polite society had of their servants. “A man of sense should never raise his hand and strike someone on the cheek; propriety and good manners do not permit this, not even toward a servant.”<sup>62</sup> “It is most discourteous and even shameful to kick other people in any part of the body; no one can be permitted to do this, not even a father (of a family) toward his servants.”<sup>63</sup>

It was not uncommon in the seventeenth century for masters to beat their servants, as we know from novels and plays of the time. In the first chapter of *Decorum & Civility*, however, De La Salle reminds his reader that “every Christian must behave according to the gospel rules and so must give honor and respect to every other person, looking upon all others as the children of God and the brothers of Jesus Christ, and, considering himself as burdened with sinfulness, he must for all those reasons humble himself and place himself lower than all.”

## **Chapter Six: Part Two of *Decorum & Civility***

The contents of Part Two of De La Salle’s book on civility will be studied through a selection of themes taken from four different chapters of the book. The themes chosen will be those concerning fashion and clothes, recreation, food and eating habits, and finally visits and conversation. Extracts from the original will enable the reader to form a clear idea of the scope of the whole book and of the attitude of De La Salle to the customs and morals of his time, to the “rules” of good manners and gracious living, and to the deeper motives that underlie the whole conception of this book. [The consideration of these four themes constitutes the subject matter of the following four chapters of this reflection.]

In order to appreciate a seventeenth-century book written on the manners of polite society, however, it is [first] necessary to have some idea as to how that society saw itself.

French society, under the Ancien Régime, was divided, juridically at least, into three Orders: the Clergy, the Nobility, and the Third Estate. In theory and perhaps in origin, the clergy were the “oratores,” those who prayed; the nobility were the “bellatores,” those who fought; and those in the Third Estate were the rest of the nation, those who produced the “laboratores.” In return for the protection of their prayers or their arms, the common people provided the clergy and the nobility with the benefit of their labor. Or to look at it from another angle, the clergy and the

nobility were exempted from the necessity to till the land or trade with others because of the two services they rendered the people. But this “privilege” or special arrangement could be extended into other areas or interpreted in various ways by the feudal lawyers.

In 1439, a tax called the “taille” was introduced in France by vote of the Estates-General<sup>64</sup> in order to raise an army to fight the English. In most of France, the “taille” was a personal tax levied on anyone who was a member of the Third Estate, on the principle that those who did not fight should pay for those who did. But by the seventeenth century, this tax had long lost its feudal meaning and had instead become – in common with a larger number of other ancient rents, dues, and obligations – the distinctive mark of the “commoner,” the “roturier.” To pay such taxes or to be constrained to such obligations was not merely a burden in itself, it was a certain sign of low birth, it was to be counted with the laborer, the artisan, a “vile person.”

Consequently, the aim in life of anyone who wished to better himself was to acquire the “privileges” attached to noble rank and to rid himself, by the same token, of the unmistakable signs of lowliness. To become wealthy was not sufficient in itself; the source of one’s wealth was important. Trade and commerce vilified; rents from land ennobled. But it was wealth that provided the key, opening the door to “dignités,” to the privileges that would free a person from the social stigma of being one who was “taillable.”

With their money, the wealthy bourgeois could buy themselves out of the Third Estate and into a position in which, if not they themselves, at least their grandchildren would, after three generations, be adjudged of “noble birth.” One way of using wealth was to buy land, to move one’s source of income from trade to rents. The ambition of the bourgeoisie was to buy land from a Seigneurie and, thus, be able to attach the words *Sieur de . . .* after their names. With the purchase of an estate, they themselves would then be able to benefit from seigneurial rents. To own a fief signified proximity to the nobility; and the nobility were willing to sell because they always needed money. “The need for money reconciles the nobility with the commoner and abolishes privileges founded on four generations.”<sup>65</sup>

The second and easier way of removing oneself from the burdens of “la roture” was by purchasing an office under the crown. Possession of a crown-appointment gave a person exemption from the “taille” and other impositions and could even raise a man to the ranks of the nobility. The government was not slow to perceive the profit to be made from this traffic by the creating and selling of offices. Richelieu explains the introduction of venality under Francis II by the fact that there was no surer or swifter means to acquire the wealth of his subjects than to confer on them honors in return for money. According to Montesquieu, the French king did not possess gold mines like the Spanish king; but he was nonetheless rich because the vanity of his subjects was more inexhaustible than any gold mine. The selling of offices was, in fact, a tax on vanity.

The constant thought, the dream of all Frenchmen, was to become a “gentilhomme,” a noble. This was possible because French society in the seventeenth century was a sufficiently open society for a man to move from one class to another provided he fulfilled certain conditions. Between the merchant class, the upper bourgeoisie, and the “gentilshommes” (the nobility), there was a gap filled by “officers,” the holders of crown offices. Since venality provided access to

the highest offices – those of judges in the parliaments – it was thus possible to reach up to the highest classes of society. La Bruyère wryly comments that every man in France touches, on one side, the commoner and, on the other side, the prince.

It is noteworthy that the family of John Baptist de La Salle belonged to the class of “officers,” as judges of the presidial, or royal court, of Rheims. His brothers Jean-Remy became a judge in the Cour des Monnaies<sup>66</sup> and Pierre followed in his father’s legal career.

But it was not sufficient to belong to an “order.” To be accepted as a noble, one had to live nobly. Lifestyle, personal behavior, and general appearance were as important as the source of one’s income – from rents and not from trade. Clothes and manner defined one unmistakably as belonging to a particular order in society. A noble, for instance, must wear colored clothes to distinguish himself from the grays and blacks of the Third Estate. According to a seventeenth-century writer, Charles Loyseau, “it is not enough to be a noble if one does not live in the style of a noble.” The idea of living nobly – “noble vivant noblemen” – played an important part in the aspirations of the French seventeenth-century bourgeoisie. Every detail of dress, every detail of etiquette, must be noted if a member of the bourgeois was to enter the ranks of the nobility. Failure to observe the proper etiquette could have disastrous consequences. For example in 1715, a lackey calling himself the Marquis de Ruffec set out on a tour of the country houses of the Midi of France; and he gave himself away one day when dining with the Commandant de Bayonne when he helped himself to olives with a fork. As soon as dinner was over, he was arrested and imprisoned as an imposter. “The wives of the bourgeois appropriated the title of Madame, which had previously belonged only to ladies of the nobility, in order to distinguish themselves from women of the artisan class,” wrote Loyseau in 1620.

The author of a pamphlet in 1619 noted with satisfaction: “What is a merchant today? And what is there more honorable today? One can recognize him now by his fortune. He is clad in silk and a coat of plush.” On the other hand, a certain Collette, inspired by noble circles in Paris, published in 1665 under the title “The Vanity and Pomp of the Simple Bourgeois” a complaint that one could no longer distinguish gentlewomen from ordinary women because the latter “wear clothes inappropriate to their rank.” It is against this background that we must read the strictures of De La Salle on those who would “rise above their state in life” relative to the “merchant who would make himself look ridiculous by wearing a plume in his hat or carrying a sword at his side.” The aristocracy and the bourgeois intelligentsia mix socially, but it is an imperative of tact to observe social distinctions and to give them unambiguous expression in social conduct. The most exact observance of differences of rank in behavior becomes the essence of courtesy, the basic requirement of civility, at least, in France.

### **Chapter Seven: *Decorum & Civility on Fashion***

One calls fashion the way clothes are made at the present time; one must conform to it as much in one’s hat as in one’s linen and one’s suit of clothes. It would be quite contrary to propriety for a man to wear a tall hat or one with a wide brim when everybody else has a low hat with a small brim.

What can best determine the correctness of clothing is fashion. One must follow it unfailingly.

One must not, however, run after every fashion. There are some that are short-lived and freakish. There are others that are reasonable and proper . . .

The surest and most reasonable rule concerning fashion is neither to be the inventor, nor to be the first to follow it, nor to wait to leave it until there is no one else following it . . .

It is a sign of a man of sense never to make himself conspicuous in any way.

Correctness in clothes is one of the things most closely connected with propriety (*bienséance*); it even helps to reveal the mentality and the behavior of a person; often it also gives a good idea of his virtue, not without reason.

For clothes to be correct, they must be right for the person wearing them, and appropriate to his size, age, and status.

If one wants to have a suit of clothes that is correct, one must follow the usage of the country and dress like the persons of one's standing and one's age. It is, however, important to be careful not to have any superfluous luxuries on one's clothes; and one should remove anything that is ostentatious and worldly-minded.

For clothes to be correct, one must also pay attention to the age of the person for whom they are intended; for it is not proper for a child to be dressed like a young man or for a young man's clothes to be more ornate than those of an old man.

It would be quite improper for a fifteen-year-old boy to be dressed in black, unless he were an ecclesiastic or aspiring to be one shortly; it would seem ridiculous for a young man who was thinking of getting married, to wear clothes as plain and as unadorned as those of a man of seventy; and what is right for one is certainly not proper for the other.

A suit of clothes beribboned with gold braid or made of a precious material is suitable only for a person of quality, and a commoner who would want to dress like that would make himself a laughing stock; besides which he would incur an expense that would without doubt offend God, being above what his state in life requires and what his resources would allow. It would, also, be very indecent for a tradesman to wear a feather in his hat or a sword at his side.

Women too must make their clothes conform to their rank; and if it might be tolerated that a lady of high rank should wear a dress edged with gold lace, which however is hardly proper for a Christian, this would be an impertinence in a member of the bourgeoisie<sup>67</sup>; the latter could not wear a string of fine pearls or a diamond of great value without appearing to be above herself.

As for ecclesiastics, their fashion must be to have an appearance and clothes that conform to those ecclesiastics who are most pious and regular in their conduct, following in this the advice of Saint Paul, not to conform oneself to the world.<sup>68</sup>

According to Antoine de Courtin,<sup>69</sup> clothing reveals personality (“le sentiment de notre coeur”) and also a person’s frame of mind and virtue because “it is impossible that, seeing a person wearing ridiculous clothes, one should not forthwith consider that person to be ridiculous as well.” He goes on to argue that “propriety” resides in a certain aptness of the clothes to the person just as politeness is the appropriateness of our reactions to other people. This aptness assumes the conformity of clothing to the size, age, and condition of the person. Impropriety comes from excess in two directions: affectation and negligence. Fashion is the law that one must, without exception, follow. Reason must “bend beneath this absolute mistress.” We must follow “what it pleases her to order without further reasoning, if we do not wish to abandon polite life.” To avoid appearing ridiculous, one should go to the source of fashion, the court. Those who cannot do so, should follow some wise person who has been to court. Thus, they will avoid the “exaggerations and absurdities of fashion” and will follow that moderation which should be the rule guiding the whole behavior of a Christian . . . thus resulting in a kind of paradox, that fashion, which is capricious, strange, and even scandalous, becomes reasonable and moderate.

The second element of propriety is cleanliness “which is all the more necessary as it can take the place of the first, should this be lacking, for if clothes are clean, and above all if one’s linen is white, it is not important that one should be richly attired, one will always be well-dressed, even in poverty.” Courtin then mentions briefly cleanliness of the head, eyes, teeth, and feet: “bad teeth spoil the mouth and smell foul for those to whom we are talking.”

Courtin’s short chapter of nine pages is developed by De La Salle into a chapter of nineteen pages, sub-divided into five articles: 1) on aptness and fashion; 2) on moderation and cleanliness; 3) on the hat and how to use it; 4) on the cloak, gloves, stockings, shoes, and cravat; and 5) on the sword, stick, cane, and staff. This follows closely the order of the Lyon *Civility*; but the latter treats of clothing in eleven articles that De La Salle has regrouped into five, adding sections on stockings, shoes, the shirt, and the cravat.

De La Salle accepts Courtin’s view that clothes reveal the man. Courtin’s division of his subject matter into aptness and cleanliness reappear in both the Lyon *Civility* and in De La Salle. But De La Salle avoids both the brevity of Courtin and the question and answer form adopted by the author of the Lyon text. Writing a book to be used by children as a school reader, De La Salle develops the ideas logically, groups like matters together, proceeds by short sentences, and avoids longer and more involved sentences. In particular, he shows his acumen as a good teacher by providing his young readers with clear examples of what he means and does so without any of the crudity of his forerunners and even that of the Lyon *Civility*. De La Salle has mastered the art of explaining things with great clarity, while at the same time maintaining a lightness of touch about even the most delicate matters.

He respects Courtin's words that clothes must be appropriate to the wearer, but he follows this up with examples: it would be better for clothes to be rather too short or close-fitting than too long or too voluminous. Whereas Courtin says that an old person should not dress like a young man nor an ecclesiastic like a man of the world, De La Salle reverses the comparison. He proposes that it is not fitting for a young man who is about to be married to be dressed as plainly as an elderly person, or for a young man to be dressed in black unless he is going to be a priest. De La Salle avoids Courtin's reference to the fashions of worldly priests and simply advises priests or seminarians who might read his book that they should imitate the ways of those priests who are most pious and regular in their lives, following the advice of Saint Paul that one should not conform to the ways of the world. One might perhaps regret the disappearance of Courtin's delightful comment on making clothes fit the size of the wearer, that the man of small stature should beware when the fashion is for clothes to be large, for hats to be wide-brimmed; for if he does not trim the width of his collar to his small stature, he will appear to be "all collar"; and if he wears a hat with the fashionable very wide brim "one will see nothing but a hat walking down the street." De La Salle does however remark that it would be contrary to propriety, and therefore absurd, for a man to wear a tall hat with a wide brim when everyone else has gone over to low hats with narrow brims, a comment that is interestingly close to Molière's satire in the *School for Husbands* of a curmudgeonly husband who is always delightfully out of fashion.<sup>70</sup>

De La Salle copies Courtin's views on fashion but makes significant changes in the phrasing. Where Courtin writes "Now the law which one must without fail observe for propriety is fashion," De La Salle writes "That which can best regulate propriety in clothes is fashion; one must follow it without fail." De La Salle refuses to elevate propriety into a law; it is an expedient, something that can be used to "regulate" – a word of which he is very fond – an expedient that will bring clothing into line with general use and thus avoid absurdity, a rule that, he has already said, is changeable and adaptable to the time and circumstances, a useful norm. That fashion must be followed without exception is simply a conclusion of common sense, not a law, in a society that was hierarchically organized, a safe rule that was to be followed if one was not to be ostracized, or in Courtin's words, "to abandon polite society."

Courtin's next words are totally changed by De La Salle. For Courtin, fashion is a mistress whose every whim must be obeyed. For this poetic flight of fancy, De La Salle substitutes a short reflection on the subject of change:

For as the mind of man is greatly subject to change and because what pleased him yesterday no longer pleases him today, men have invented or invent every day various ways of dressing so as to satisfy their fickle minds; and the people who would wish today to dress as people dressed thirty years ago would appear to be ridiculous oddities. It is, however, the mark of a man of sense never to make himself conspicuous in anything.

Courtin hints at the extravagances of some forms of fashion. De La Salle elaborates; one must not run after every fashion as soon as it appears: "There are some that are whimsical and freakish ... which are usually followed only by a small number of people and which do not last long."

Others are "reasonable and suitable"; these are the ones to follow.

The general rule given by De La Salle is an example of solid bourgeois common sense: “The surest and most reasonable rule concerning fashion is not to be the inventor, not to be the first to follow it, and not to wait until no one else is following it before leaving it.”

Don’t start a fashion; don’t be the first to follow one; don’t be the last to leave it. This seems to be a rule for mediocrity in the modern sense of the word. Never stand out. “Do not be conspicuous in anything.” When one remembers that the writer of these words left his priestly garb to wear the strange, new habit of the Brothers, a habit that attracted insults and even brickbats,<sup>71</sup> it is impossible to accuse De La Salle of a spineless mediocrity, of a sheepish following of the herd. “There are some [fashions] that are reasonable and suitable.”

De La Salle’s thinking is as Cartesian here as that of Courtin, the admirer of René Descartes’ philosophy. To understand De La Salle’s thought, we must see his writings in the full context of his life. He is writing for children, for seminarians, for young priests, for young people in general. He is not concerned to discuss society or social phenomena. He accepts the society he lives in, as did everybody else. He has already made clear, in the preface of *Decorum & Civility*, that he is aware of the changes in society wrought by time and place, of the variations of social attitudes and customs.

The whole thrust of the teaching in his schools will be to enable the children of the poor to better their condition in life; but this, by implication, is to change the rigid structures of society under Louis XIV. The teaching of the French language is to be preferred to the teaching of Latin and the teaching of technical drawing to the production of hosiery because, in this way, his children will be better prepared to earn their living, to improve their lot in life. But to do this in a hierarchical society required conformity to the rules of the game. There was no room in the late seventeenth century or the dawning of the eighteenth for the nonconformist, not unless he happened also to be a Condé or a La Rochefoucauld, or a Retz<sup>72</sup>; and even then, he might end up in exile. De La Salle accepts the rules of the seventeenth-century game of “lifemanship.” When having a suit of clothes made, “one must remember one’s condition in life. It would not be proper [i.e. according to the “rules”] for a poor man to be dressed like a rich man, for a commoner to be attired like a nobleman.”

There are certain clothes, such as those which are plain and made of homespun cloth and which are in common use and which are available to almost everyone except the poor, although it might seem more appropriate that artisans should leave suits of broadcloth for persons of higher rank than themselves.

De La Salle is clearly a man of his time and of his family background, even in his prejudices. At the same time, he is giving good advice to the “middle class” at a time when the pretensions of provincial gentlemen and their wives were the stock in trade of satirical writers and playwrights, not least of all, of Molière. Thus, he advises that a commoner should not wear gold braid nor expensive clothes, neither should a tradesman wear a plume in his hat nor carry a sword at his side, all ways of making himself a “laughing stock.”

In speaking of women’s fashions, De La Salle is even more forthright. He considers, with Saint Paul, that as women are by nature less capable than men of great things, they are also more likely

than men to seek vanity and luxury in their clothes.<sup>73</sup> It is for this reason that Saint Paul, after urging men to avoid the grosser faults in which they fall more easily than women, then advises women to dress simply, to adorn themselves with modesty and purity, and not to adorn themselves with gold, pearls, or sumptuous clothes. Nonetheless, De La Salle tempers his advice to the accepted fashions.

A lady's dress must conform to her rank. A dress edged with gold lace might be tolerated in a noble lady, although it would scarcely be proper for a Christian. For a member of the bourgeoisie,<sup>74</sup> it would be impertinent. The latter could not wear a string of fine pearls or a diamond of great value without appearing to be above herself.

De La Salle frequently recalls his readers to a view of faith. Saint Paul might seem, on occasion, to be brought into play to support a line of argument in a way which today would be rather suspect. But there is no doubt about De La Salle's attitude as a Christian: God everywhere, God in all, God the foundation of all our aims and activity. The origin of self-respect and of respect for others is none other than the presence of God in ourselves and in others.

Referring to Courtin's two enemies of correctness in clothing – affectation and negligence – De La Salle says that these two excesses are equally blameworthy. Affectation is contrary to the law of God, which condemns luxury and vain ostentation in clothes and adornments. "Negligence in one's dress is a sign either that one does not pay attention to the presence of God or that one does not have enough respect for him; it also shows that one has little respect for one's own body, which one ought however to adorn as the living temple of the Holy Spirit and the tabernacle where Jesus Christ has the goodness frequently to reside." There is no room in De La Salle's spirituality for slovenliness, even disguised as holy poverty.

Courtin, as we have seen, develops the same theme differently and reaches a different conclusion. It is by attending the king's court at Versailles or by following some wise person who has been to court that a man will avoid "the luxury and whims of fashion" and will thus reduce fashion to that sense of moderation which should be the rule of behavior for a Christian so that, in a paradoxical way, fashion will become reasonable and moderate. The author of the *Lyon Civility* alters very slightly the wording of Courtin. "He will avoid the luxury and whims of fashion and will reduce it to moderation which ought to be the rule of behavior for a Christian." De La Salle turns the phrasing even more positively: "The way to set limits to fashion in clothes and to prevent those following it from going to excess, is to reduce it and to submit it to moderation which should be the rule of conduct for a true Christian in everything that is external. To busy oneself with vain ostentation in clothing, to be fond of luxurious and sumptuous apparel, reveals a lack of common sense; but what is of much greater importance is that such people make a public renunciation of their baptismal promises and of the spirit of Christianity."<sup>75</sup>

De La Salle is quite prepared to accept that the "rules" of good behavior will vary from country to country, from time to time, that what is acceptable in France will not necessarily be considered polite elsewhere, that these "rules" may, as was Courtin's opinion, be best learned from watching the court. But for De La Salle, the "law" which guides basic attitudes toward oneself and toward

the other is the thought of the all-abiding presence of God and, for a Christian, the great mystery of Christ's eucharistic presence.

De La Salle, the priest confessor, links "everything that is external" to the internal. To a people much given to ostentation and vanity in clothing, to a society in which men's clothes could be as brilliant as women's, in which the outward appearance, the sustaining of "honor," the ability to maneuver one's way through the myriad precepts and unwritten rules of polite society were all of the utmost importance if one was not to be forced "to abandon polite society," De La Salle preaches the spirit of Christianity, baptismal promises in action. There is no divergence here, no compromise, between De La Salle the saint and De La Salle the man of the seventeenth-century world. As much as Francis de Sales, De La Salle is concerned to show how to live one's life in the world into which one is born and how, at the same time, to fulfill one's baptismal promises, to be a "true" Christian. The key is in De La Salle's twofold devotion to the presence of God in us as temples of the Holy Spirit and the recollection of our dignity as "tabernacles where Jesus Christ has the goodness frequently to reside." The conclusion is not one of flight from the world, of abstention; it is a thoroughly positive one, of "having respect for one's body which one ought to adorn," but for reasons that are wholly Christian.

### **Chapter Eight: *Decorum & Civility on Recreational Activities***

In his spiritual writings, De La Salle proposes to his Brothers a highly formalized style of recreation in which the time, the topics of conversation, and the manner of conversing follow a set pattern. It is interesting to compare this with what he has to say about the same subject when writing for the laity and for the society of the day.

A description of the kind of entertainment available for the king's courtiers at the new palace of Versailles will enable us to situate in their social context De La Salle's chapter on entertainments and, also, to appreciate better the point of some of his remarks and reservations. The courtiers of Louis XIV gathered on three evenings a week in the splendid suite of reception rooms known as the Grand Apartment, with ceilings decorated by Charles Le Brun<sup>76</sup> and his disciples. These rooms are still today, with the exception of the actual furniture, the same as they were in the days of Louis XIV and De La Salle.

The evening entertainment that took place in these sumptuous rooms was itself called "the apartment" and was, of course, gambling, without which it would have been impossible to keep the courtiers amused and contented. Indeed, Versailles was nothing if not a vast casino and was known at the time as the "tripot," the gambling den. When the king was present, restraint had to be shown even when one was losing. But when the king was absent from the room, those nobles who were losing would howl, blaspheme, make faces, and pull their hair out. They all cheated shamelessly if they could. No one seemed to mind. Ten or eleven varieties of card games were played, as well as *hocca*, a kind of roulette, at which enormous sums were lost and which was so crooked that it was forbidden in Paris by Reynie, the chief of police. Unfortunately for Reynie and to his annoyance, Louis XIV not only allowed it at court, he also played it himself although his favorite pastime was billiards.

Other entertainments of the court included plays, concerts, and balls as well as the ballet and the opera. Opera became established in France from 1672 through the partnership of the musician Lulli and the librettist Quinault, a partnership as famous as that of Gilbert and Sullivan of a later century. Many great names contributed to make the period memorable for its literary and theatrical productions. The great writers enjoyed royal patronage, and their plays often had their debut on the stage or in the gardens of Versailles. In the opera particularly, elaborate stage effects were contrived: winged goddesses descending from Olympus upon gardens in which played real fountains and cascades, amid the rolling of thunder.

The poorer people had different entertainments – those that were customary throughout Europe at that time – travelling actors, Italian troupes, fairs, jugglers, acrobats, tightrope walkers, animal trainers, etc.

Yet despite official royal protection, there was an ambivalent attitude toward the theater. Some of the great actors of the day were ennobled by letters-patent from the king with the special clause that they would not derogate from noble rank by reason of their performing on the stage, for the stage like trade was an occupation that was normally barred to the nobility. Yet the church frowned on the theater and excommunicated actors. Molière, the greatest name of all perhaps, collapsed on the stage and died performing the role he had created of the *Malade Imaginaire*.<sup>77</sup> He would have been refused a Christian burial but for the intervention of the king whom his widow implored, but even then he had to be buried secretly at night. This attitude of the church has to be remembered when we read De La Salle's strictures on the stage and on dancing.

It is instructive to compare De La Salle's attitude toward recreational activities with that of some of his better-known contemporaries. Here, for instance, is what Francis de Sales has to say:

Games of dice, cards, etc., where winning depends mainly on chance, are not only dangerous pastimes like dancing, they are of their nature absolutely bad and blameworthy . . . games are meant to be diverting, but these games of chance are not true diversions; they are violent occupations . . .

However, Francis de Sales also says:

. . . the need for honest diversions to give relaxation to the mind and rest the body is universally recognized. To go out walking and to enjoy the air, to relax with agreeable and entertaining conversation, to play an instrument, to sing, to go hunting, are honest diversions which, to be well used, require but common prudence . . . Games can be honest diversions so long as passions are not roused. Dances and balls, indifferent in themselves, can easily become dangerous. The rule for dances and games is as follows: for recreation not inclination, for a short time, rarely.<sup>78</sup>

The great, and very lengthy, preacher Bourdaloue declared in a famous sermon on the "diversions of the world" that some recreations could be "honest" – legitimate – but he immediately added: "But I also declare with Pope Saint Gregory that these worldly diversions,

legitimate and innocent, are indeed rare . . . in a word, that most worldly diversions are to be condemned.”

And this for three reasons: they are impure and forbidden in themselves (the theater and the novel); they lead to excesses (games of chance); their effects are nearly always scandalous (balls and walks).

Bousset, the great bishop of Meaux and court preacher, who could with impunity, when preaching before the king and his court on the scripture passage about the woman taken in adultery, point an accusing finger at the king’s current mistress, Louise de La Vallière, and thunder out “*vide hanc mulierem*,”<sup>79</sup> was also not slow to condemn the immorality of the theater. Pascal, the Jansenist, went even further: “All the chief forms of amusement are dangerous to the Christian life. But of all those invented by the world, there is none to be more feared than the theater. The only thing that consoles us in our misery is diversion, and yet this is the greatest of our misfortunes.”

The standard argument of the writers of plays was that they had a “cathartic” effect, that they purified the emotions, that evil and its punishment when depicted on the stage deterred men from similar actions. This was countered by church writers who said that, in the theater, evil was made to appear attractive and desirable whilst religion and piety were derided. The struggle between the two sides came to a head over Molière’s play *Le Tartuffe* which portrayed a religious hypocrite, and which after the first performance of part of the play before the king at Versailles in 1664, was banned until 1669 when the interdict was finally removed by the civil authorities despite its condemnation by Bourdaloue and the adverse criticism of Bousset. We shall not be surprised to find that De La Salle follows the general attitude of religious writers of the day with regard to the theater and certain other forms of entertainment. What is noticeable, however, in his attitude toward various forms of relaxation is his willingness to accept many of them as normal and desirable as well as his mildness in warning about their dangers, a mildness that we have noticed to be a constant trait of character.

For De La Salle, “diversions are exercises at which one can spend part of the day in order to relax the mind from serious occupations and the body from tiring work . . . It is quite right to have occasional periods of rest; the body and the mind need them.”<sup>80</sup> A scriptural justification is to be seen in God’s rest “on the seventh day” and in Christ’s invitation to his apostles to go aside and rest with him after the labor of their apostolic preaching. However, De La Salle adds that it is possible, in recreational activities, to wound one’s conscience, to harm one’s neighbor or to offend against good manners; he therefore considers it appropriate to describe acceptable forms of relaxation, which are, recreation, games, singing, and walking.

What he means by recreation is to be seen in the heading of the first article: “on recreation and laughter.” The two are joined together; recreation should be fun. Recreation, he says, consists in “conversing in a relaxed manner, in amusing and entertaining anecdotes which provoke laughter and divert those present.” Laughter is particularly suited to the time following “meals” for besides the fact that “one cannot apply oneself to serious work immediately after a meal, to remain relaxed and joyful in the period following a meal will assist in the digestion of food.

De La Salle then warns against the faults that can be committed at such times: laughter at other people's expense, at religion, at impure actions, at other people's misfortunes. A Christian must have such a veneration for everything concerning the worship of God and the words of scripture that he never allows himself to turn them into a subject of mockery. As for other people's imperfections, these are either natural or "vicious." In the first case, "it is unworthy of a man of good sense and upright conduct to laugh at them since they are not the fault of the person with them, and they could happen to anyone." In the latter case, it is "quite contrary to charity and to the Christian spirit" to laugh at them; rather one should feel compassion for such people and come to their assistance."

The gentle Christian spirit of De La Salle shines in every line of this section: his moderation, his dislike of the excesses of his fellow-countrymen, the excesses of rigor which caused the preachers to condemn even the simple pleasures of life as well as the excesses of the free-thinkers, the libertines who openly mock religion. De La Salle was well aware of the attitudes of the latter for his biographers relate the cases of several young profligates who were won back to the practice of their religion through the ministry of this wise and gentle priest. The remainder of the article on recreation concerns practical tips on the avoidance of social blunders – laughing to excess or at the wrong moment, insensitivity to the feelings of others – for "charity as well as propriety requires us to share in the sorrows of others as well as in their happiness."

The article on recreation contains advice of a general nature, suitable to all times; but in the following articles on walks, we are plunged back into the world of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a world of minute and intricate etiquette. "Walking is an honest exercise that contributes greatly to the health of the body and that leaves the mind more disposed toward its own activities; it becomes a diversion when it is accompanied by agreeable conversation."<sup>81</sup>

Having stated this, De La Salle then gives four pages on the way people must position themselves when walking together up and down an enclosed space, a garden. A glimpse into this world of seventeenth-century etiquette is of interest, if only to show us how natural to the period were many of the rules and regulations that were also to be found in the Brothers' first *Common Rules*, that of 1705.<sup>82</sup> When walking, the place of honor is in the middle if there are three people but on the right hand side if there are only two. When turning back at the end of the garden, the turn must be made in such a manner as to preserve the same order. If however three people of equal rank are walking together, they might signify this equality by alternately occupying the first, second, and third places of honor, the middle, the right, and the left. If a number of people are walking together, they should turn toward the person of highest rank, who would be in the middle. It is polite for a person of lower rank to walk slightly in front of the speaker of higher rank, but "not so far ahead that he cannot be heard."

The minutiae of these and other details which turn a recreational walk into a ceremonial procession might make us smile, but they are an interesting example of the role of unspoken signs and tacit acknowledgments of the hierarchy of rank upon which this society of the seventeenth century was founded. It was of the utmost importance for a man to know his own position in that society and to be able to discern accurately and acknowledge the position of others relative to everybody else. It would be an insult to offer a man less than his due, and a mockery to offer him more than his due share of deference. And in a society in which swords

were readily unsheaved “in defense of honor” and blood was spilled, in which clumsy servants were beaten, in which an altercation with a nobleman could result in a spell in the Bastille, as Voltaire would find out only a few years later, it was clearly desirable to be able to read all the signs and to interpret them correctly.

In the third article of the sixth chapter, De La Salle comes to the only pastime mentioned by Courtin, games, by which is meant card games and gambling. One’s first reaction on reading this section is one of surprise: seven pages on good manners at the gaming table written by a canonized saint of the Church! And again, one’s interest is gripped by two things. First of all, we note De La Salle’s total immersion in life as it was lived in his day. Gaming, like snuff taking, might not be the best of things; but it was done. It was an accepted custom of the day; and indulged to a certain degree, it was not of itself sinful. And the second thing one notices is how here again De La Salle reveals his spirit of moderation, balance, gentleness, and tolerance.

Gambling is a diversion that is sometimes permissible, but which must be approached with great care. It is an occupation at which one can spend a certain amount of time, but one must also show restraint. Great care is needed not to let oneself go to some unruly passion. Restraint is necessary not to become entirely absorbed, not to spend too much time on it.

Two passions that must be avoided are greed and the excitement of the game. “Those who play must take great care not to play through greed, play having been invented not to win money but simply to relax the mind and body after work.”

It is not proper to play for high stakes, only for small sums which will “neither enrich the winner nor impoverish the loser,” but which “will help to keep the game going and make a person want to win, which contributes greatly to the pleasure of the game.”

One should not be impatient when playing for “it is shameful to give ways to displays of temper,” a necessary comment after what we have seen of the behaviors of the courtiers at the gaming tables of Versailles.

Here, as always, De La Salle is forever the priest, the informed confessor. Courtin, in his short chapter on gaming, has nothing to say on the ethics of this activity. He goes straight to the details of practical advice to the tyro courtier. Do not play if you feel out of sorts. Do not whistle or drum your fingers while you play. Do not argue. Do not swear for “besides being an offense to God, it is a very great lack of self-control in polite society.” If you win and someone has omitted to pay, ask for the stakes quietly. If you lose, pay before you are asked to do so for “it is a sign of nobility of mind to pay what one owes at games.” And if you play with a person of quality who does not like losing, you should not leave the table as soon as you win. Courtin, the diplomat and accomplished courtier, makes no mention of cheating.

De La Salle, the confessor, does. He comes straight to the point. “It is quite contrary to good manners to cheat at games. It is even theft. And if one wins, one is obliged to make restitution, even though one’s skill was partly responsible for winning.” He repeats Courtin’s advice on how to remind a loser to pay for his stakes, but the formula suggested by De La Salle is even more

courteous than that of the diplomat: “you seem to have forgotten to place your stake.” And to the loser who plays on and tries to get away without paying: “be so kind as to place a double stake in this game” or “we are short of such and such a sum as it was not put in the last game.”

The essential thing is to show that one is happy to play “for one plays only to enjoy oneself.” To be overjoyed with delight when one wins or cast down with dejection when one loses is a sign that one is not playing for entertainment but for money. The remedy is simple: to play for such small sums that neither winning nor losing can cause great passion. It is only at this point, after four pages of gentle and sensible advice, that De La Salle repeats, almost word for word, Courtin’s advice on how not to annoy one’s partners, how to behave with the person of quality who hates losing, to avoid playing when one feels out of sorts, how to behave with an ill-tempered partner, not to laugh at the person who plays stupidly, not to get angry at losing, and not to play so casually that one loses too easily and gives one’s opponent the feeling that one takes little interest in his pleasure.

From card games and from gambling, De La Salle goes on to consider games of physical exercise. “Games which give the body exercise – such as tennis, lawn bowls, battledore, and shuttlecock – are to be preferred even to those which involve too much activity and application of the mind, such as chess and draughts.”

As this is a book on civility, De La Salle passes straight on to the proper manner of dressing for these games. “One must not remove one’s clothes or even one’s hat. These are things that propriety does not permit.”

It may strike us a strange that a games player should not be allowed to remove even his hat, but even cricket has its own laws and customs that not much long ago were much stricter than they are today! No seventeenth-century gentleman could allow himself to appear casually dressed before a public that might include members of the Third Estate ever ready to mock their superiors. As for the hat, which must not be removed, one must also remember that seventeenth-century players also wore their wigs when playing; and to lose one’s wig was the height of indignity.

When playing games of chess and draughts, we are told that the white pieces must always be presented to one’s opponent, never the black ones, an odd detail with perhaps undertones of some ancient superstitious origin? Card games are divided into those like piquet, at which there is some semblance of skill as well as of luck, and those in which skill is absent and which are purely a matter of luck. The former are regarded as permissible; the latter, especially games of dice, are considered to be not only “forbidden by the law of God” but even “by the rules of propriety” and therefore “unworthy of an educated person.”

The section ends with a final warning on the need for moderation, that ever-recurring word at exercise and games. To play too often or to spend too much time at games is to make one’s occupation of something that should be merely an interruption in one’s daily round of work.

The fourth type of diversion is singing. This is recommended as a diversion which is not only permitted but is even “most honest” and which can “recreate the mind in a manner that is very

pleasant and quite innocent at the same time.” Most of this section is to be found also in Courtin from whom De La Salle borrows heavily, with minor changes and with the usual rearrangement of ideas. To singing, Courtin adds the accomplishment of writing poetry as a desirable occupation. Aiming at a totally different readership from Courtin’s young courtiers, De La Salle leaves this accomplishment unmentioned.

De La Salle’s scheme is clear. First, he refers to the dangers to the Christian of impious and lewd songs and, then, refers to the advantages of religious music. After that, he repeats Courtin’s comments on the playing of instruments and, finally, castigates some of the mannerisms of the century.

A Christian should “not let himself go to sing all sorts of songs.” He must eschew those that are lewd, loose, or suggestive and that speak of excesses of drinking since by repeatedly singing of these things one can acquire a penchant for them. “Song has a far greater power to influence people than words alone.” These statements are then supported by reference to scripture: “sing and make music in your heart to the Lord”<sup>83</sup> and “let the word of God dwell in you richly . . . as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”<sup>84</sup> This leads him to speak of King David and the Patriarchs, whose psalms are sung in the church by whom the faithful are invited to sing them often and parents to teach them to their children. “As these holy hymns have been translated into our language and have been put to music, everybody has the possibility and the facility to hear them and to fill mind and heart with their holy aspirations.” More than this, it “should be a great pleasure and a real diversion for Christian to bless and praise God often from their hearts.”

The transition now takes place to the playing of musical instruments. De La Salle repeats Courtin’s comments on what is clearly the accepted practice of good society. It is bad form to mention that you play an instrument. If however this fact is known or becomes known, it is good manners first to decline when asked to play. If the other person insists, one should not hesitate to play since if one played or sang badly after being so difficult the other guests would have reason to say that it was not worth the trouble to force them to be so persuasive!

There follows a list of ways of behavior that were objectionable and that are an interesting commentary on seventeenth-century manners. There is the vain player who draws attention to his own cleverness. “This is a beautiful part. This one is even better. Just listen to this cadence . . .” There is the person who bores by outstaying his welcome, by going on too long. On the other hand, it would be uncivil to make this comment out loud or to interrupt a person singing.

Other unacceptable mannerisms would be to whistle between the teeth, to mimic the antics of others, singing through the nose for instance, a reminder that in the French seventeenth century, the letter “r” was trilled and not sounded in the throat as it is today. All these ways of behaving are those of “the clown or the buffoon.” And finally, a piece of pure seventeenth-century critique: “The way to sing well and agreeably is to do so completely naturally.” Seventeenth-century readers of La Bruyère and theater goers would have had no difficulty in putting names to the vignettes sketched in this chapter; and the dramatic and literary giants of the Grand Siècle would have heartily approved of De La Salle’s last sentence: “good and agreeable singing is done in a manner that is completely natural.” Molière would have applauded.

This section on the influence and use of song reminds us that De La Salle was busy publishing a collection of hymns at the same time as his *Decorum & Civility* was published. Three kinds of hymns were made available to his Brothers: hymns to be sung daily at catechism time, hymns that contained a summary of Christian doctrine, and hymns for the principal religious festivals of the year.

De La Salle's statement that song had greater power over men than speech received practical expression in his schools. It is also of interest to note that a number of these hymns were to be sung to the tunes of popular songs of the day: a translation of the *Dies Irae* to "Already I hear the sound of arms . . ."; a hymn on the love of Jesus to "We bask in country joys . . ."; one on the Last Judgment to "One day, wishing to enlist . . ."; and on the principal duties of a Christian to "What are you doing shepherdess . . ."

Molière would not have been so enthusiastic over De La Salle's next section, although he would not have been surprised by it. The article on "diversions that are not permitted" is distinctive for several reasons. Unlike the rest of *Decorum & Civility*, it contains no positive advice on how to behave like a person of good breeding. Indeed, it has nothing positive to say about balls, dances, the theater, and popular entertainments that are the subject matter of the article. It is instead an argued defense for a particular theological position, one that is more suitable for a book on ethics than for one on civility. It contrasts with the other pages of De La Salle's *Decorum & Civility* by the severity of its condemnations and the sweeping nature of its strictures. It is a section that the modern reader reads with a certain uneasiness. Even more perhaps than the detailed rules of etiquette, this condemnation of much that we now take for granted places the book centuries away from us not only in time but in mood.

De La Salle begins by the uncompromising statement that the diversions of which he will be speaking will not be dealt with at length because "they are not permitted to a Christian, either by the laws of religion or by the rules of propriety." This seems an astonishing statement to make in view of the popularity of such entertainments among all classes of society, from the court on down. It has been said that the idea of the *l'homme civilisé*,<sup>85</sup> as a concept designating the manners and customs of a society, is first and foremost an expression of opposition, a criticism of society, an expression of insights that derive from social criticism.

In this section, De La Salle is far from being the mere exponent of the status quo. His attack on what he sees as social and Christian evils may, we shall see, correspond to the conventional attitudes of the seventeenth-century church and may seem to our twentieth-century eyes extravagant and lacking in balance, lacking in that frequently praised virtue of "moderation." Yet even here, we can discern De La Salle's concern to remain within the domain of reason, of common sense.

He proceeds by reasoned discussion, almost in the manner of a syllogism; and his conclusion is the clear result of his premises. In establishing his argument, it seems he finds it necessary to appeal, in the tradition of the day it is true, to the authority of the Fathers of the Church, but more perhaps because he finds it necessary to cloak with their authority the words of great severity which they use and which are so contrary to his own nature.

De La Salle divides the unacceptable diversions into two groups: those indulged in by the rich (balls, dances, the theater) and those that amuse “the artisans and the poor” (performances by “quacks, clowns, tightrope walkers, marionettes”). The term “the artisans and the poor” is frequently to be found in the writings of De La Salle. The artisans were the craftsmen, the journeymen who at the lowest level gained their livelihood by dint of hard manual labor or at the highest level attained the status and wealth of the goldsmiths. In linking them continually with the poor, the submerged masses who owned nothing and who depended on their work, when they could find it, to remain alive at the level of subsistence and often below it, De La Salle indicates clearly that he is thinking of those craftsmen whose work is just good enough to remove them from the level of actual poverty. It was for these classes especially that he had established his schools although, by the very broadness of the group of artisans in its seventeenth-century meaning and from what we know of his own history, it is clear that he did not intend his work to be restricted to the destitute.

Speaking to the rich, he declares that balls are neither Christian nor respectable. They take place at night as though the shades of night were necessary to cover all that occurs in such gatherings. Those in whose houses they are held are “absolutely obliged” to open their doors to all comers without distinction, so that their houses become “like places of public infamy.” Parents expose their daughters to the liberties taken by “all kind of youths,” liberties that they would never permit in their own homes. Girls give themselves over to the immodesties of dress and behavior and “prostitute themselves to the gaze and desires of all . . .”

Dances that take place in private homes may give rise to fewer excesses but are still improper, i.e., contrary to the propriety of good breeding. It was an ancient pagan who said that no one dances sober, unless he has lost his mind. As for the Christian, Saint Ambrose says that this diversion is fit only to excite shameful passions in the course of which modesty will lose its luster amid the noise of jumping and of dissipation. Only shameless and adulterous mothers would allow their daughters to dance, says this holy Father. Chaste and faithful mothers would teach their daughters to love virtue and not dancing, of which Saint John Chrysostom says that the body is dishonored by shameful and indecent postures since dances are the devil’s playground and those who enjoy this form of amusement are the devil’s ministers and slaves, who behave more like animals than men since they give themselves over to brutish pleasures.

On the subject of the theater, De La Salle simply repeats the traditional teaching of the church. Despite the fact that the modern theater traces its origins back to the medieval morality plays and developed from representations associated with the great liturgical feasts of the year, the post-tridentine church continued to regard the theater with the same attitude of disapproval as the early Christians and the Fathers of the Church had held toward the debased drama and mimes of the Roman Empire when “infamia”<sup>86</sup> was the legal status of actors. And one must remember that it was not so long ago that priests were forbidden to attend the theater, although not, apparently, the modern cinema.

That fact that the “world” considers plays to be a respectable (*honnête*) pastime carries no weight with De La Salle. For him, they are the “shame and disgrace of Christianity.” Why else would professional actors be stigmatized with public infamy? How can anyone support a profession and, at the same time, scorn those who follow it? Clearly, De La Salle rejects the double

standards of the world, the make-believe Christianity of those who would “have their cake” in this world and in the next, of those great men who, from the king on down, would spend their nights with their mistresses and their days with their devotions. Jansenists and Jesuits, John Baptist de La Salle and Francis de Sales, were all in agreement that much was wrong with the Christianity of their day. De La Salle’s next sentence refers to the current conflict between the partisans of the theater and its opponents, to the effect that went on throughout the seventeenth century and provoked articles from many of the greatest literary names of the period: “Is not this art infamous and shameful in which the whole skill of the actors consists in exciting in themselves and in others vile passions for which well-born persons should entertain feelings of horror?”

Can self-respect and a sense of propriety approve the apparel, the nakedness, the license of actors and actresses? Singing only serves to strengthen the passions. One recalls his earlier words on the effect of singing: “Song has a far greater power to influence people than words alone.” From self-respect and propriety, De La Salle now rises to Christian attitudes. “Is there anything in their gestures [actors], in their posturing, that is not indecent [unbecoming] for a Christian?” Then follows the conclusion of this long syllogism: “It is therefore quite contrary to good behavior (*honnêteté*) to find one’s pleasure and one’s entertainment in such plays.”

The final article in the chapter on recreational activities seems to strike a discordant note from the spirit of reasonableness, gentleness, and tolerance that pervades so much of this book. Reading it today, one has a feeling of uneasiness. It seems so enmeshed in its period and so alien to our mentality. De La Salle has already, at the beginning of the chapter, distinguished the entertainments of the rich from those of the “artisans and the poor.” He now tells us that the entertainments of the latter, set up outdoors in the fairs and at street corners by groups of strolling players, are the work of the devil aimed at those who have not the means to “taste the poison” of the officially approved theaters. “It is the devil himself who employs, uses, and forms buffoons,” who will in the words of Saint John Chrysostom, “infect every town they enter.” “No sooner have these absurd buffoons,” says the holy Father, “uttered some blasphemy or some salacious words, then one sees the most idiotic besides themselves guffawing.” To take pleasure in shows of this sort, again in the words of the same holy Father, is to reveal “the baseness of one’s mind and heart and one’s little sense of Christian spirit.” Fathers and mothers should not only abstain from attending such spectacles, they should inspire their children with a “disgust for them as contrary to propriety (*bienséance*) and to what is expected of them by Christian piety.” Good manners and the Christian spirit join forces. Good manners (*honnêteté*) also forbid assisting at shows by tightrope walkers who endanger daily both their bodies and their souls for the entertainment of others. “A man of reason would never admire them nor watch them, since they are doing something that should be condemned by everybody, simply by the ordinary light of reason.”

What is the twentieth-century reader to make of all this? Superficially, it seems as though De La Salle is simply endorsing the prejudices of the seventeenth-century “*honnête homme*” – that refined man of good breeding – toward the vulgar amusements of the lower classes. But we must give De La Salle credit for doing more than merely plagiarizing others. Throughout this book, we can see how he selects, adapts, alters, or rejects the ideas or words of his predecessors. We have here the carefully considered thoughts of a man who was not just producing a book on good

manners for school children but who, a great Christian, a priest, a confessor for whom all life is one in God, could not refrain from going beyond a description of the niceties of convention to a warning of the realities of daily life as he well knew it. He gives us a clue to the reasons for his severity – borrowed from Saint John Chrysostom – in this article when he says that no one would bother to attend the shows of the whispering players “unless they were accompanied by lewdness of speech and indecency of posturings.” Exaggeration? A modern writer on seventeenth-century French comedy has this to say: “Whilst Louis XIV was able to ensure decency at least in the two ‘official’ theaters, outrageous obscenities in speech and dumb show were offered to the public in spectacles at the great Parisians fairs . . .”

If such is the conclusion of the modern historian writing three centuries later, then we may credit De La Salle with appreciating the harm done to souls in the general abasement of Christian values and standards that he was witnessing at the dawn of the eighteenth century in what he himself called “an age as corrupt as ours.” We have here the indignation of the great Christian, the priest, the confessor, at the general moral laxity, the “outrageous obscenities” – and the cynicism – presented as entertainment to the “artisans and the poor” and to their children – uneducated and often superstitious as they were.

The distinction De La Salle makes between the entertainments of the well off, the “honnêtes gens” – educated and refined – and those of the common people does not signify any form of condescension or of class-consciousness. It was simply an understanding of the realities of life in his own world. The social context may change, but the moral judgments remain as valid today as they were three centuries ago. If the social context of much of this book seems quaint and alien to us, which of us could take exception to the solid common sense of De La Salle’s final comment in this article. Does any man of sense find pleasure in watching others risk their lives (and their souls, adds De La Salle) for his entertainment? Is it reasonable, De La Salle might say, to be entertained by the spectacle of a young man killing himself while trying to jump his motorcycle over twenty-four buses for our entertainment?

Unfortunately perhaps such moral attitudes may seem utterly remote from us, although they may have found more of an echo in our forefathers of the Victorian age. The television age and a permissive society would not know what to make of them – or it would know only too well. It would reject them with contempt. The harshness is not of De La Salle. The attitudes are those of the churchmen of his century, and they customarily borrowed their phrasing from the Fathers of the Church. De La Salle simply follows in the steps of all churchmen, great and insignificant, of his day. But it is perhaps only when we realize the extent that De La Salle was a man of his time that we can discern the message that he has to extend to us across the ages. It is his spirit, his attitude of total Christianity, of following Christ, of applying Christ’s message in the concrete reality of his own life and within the experience of his own situation, that reaches out to us across the ages and the seas. De La Salle was not concerned to write a social document, however valuable in that sense his *Decorum & Civility* is now to the historian. He was not basically concerned with social criticism, although his book, like his life work, implies a criticism of society. The relativity of social conduct has already been accepted by De La Salle in the preface. De La Salle’s concern is to find in all things the mind of Christ; he was a fully “integrated” man, a man totally taken up in Christ. For him, everything was judged from the standpoint of faith, of

the mind of Christ; and for men or women who reach such integration, there can be no half measures, no equivocal Christianity.

The Christian life, for De La Salle as for Mother Teresa, leads on to total giving. The “honnêteté” of which De La Salle is writing was called by one of his contemporaries who was well placed to know: “that apparent civility practiced in society in the midst of hatred and envy.” Too much of what passed for Christianity in the world of De La Salle would have qualified for the same definition: “that apparent Christianity.” The words “Christian” and “Christianity” appear on every page of this book on “civility” and “honnêteté.”

The first lines of his preface remarked on how little Christianity there was in his seventeenth-century world of Catholic France, and yet it is his desire that the rules of propriety and civility in use should be observed only “for purely Christian motives.”<sup>87</sup> De La Salle, the confessor, comes through these pages where he departs from the text of Courtin, the diplomat and courtier. The historical element in his attitudes can be ignored; the heroic element of De La Salle’s “true Christianity” cannot.

### **Chapter Nine: *Decorum & Civility on Table Manners & Customs***

In a French book of the seventeenth century, as one can imagine, each of the authors of the books on civility that we have mentioned dedicate a substantial number of pages to the chapter on food: Courtin (16<sup>th</sup> edition), pages 119 to 144; anonymous author the *Lyon Civility*, 29 separate articles; De La Salle’s *Decorum & Civility*, pages 76 to 130, which is divided into 10 articles. De La Salle’s chapter is the longest, 54 pages in all.

And De La Salle has once more grouped his themes, logically thus avoiding the long and tedious lists of the *Lyons Civility*: 18) On Salt, 19) On Eating, 20) On Bones, 21) On Sauce, etc. De La Salle’s articles begin with “the things one must do before eating . . .”; “the things one must use at table . . .”; “the way to behave regarding bones, sauce, fruit . . .”

All three authors are writing in a period of change, a transitional period with regard to manners; and this is evident from the changes in emphasis that appear between Courtin’s first edition published in 1671 and De La Salle’s published in 1703. During those thirty years, some significant changes had taken place in the attitudes of society, as we have already noticed with regard to the customs concerning snuff and tobacco.

The number of meals eaten gradually changed. Louis XIV, to the end of his life, seems to have contented himself with two (enormous) meals a day; but by the end of the seventeen sixties, the well-to-do Parisian was having a breakfast before his mid-day meal and a collation between dinner [the main meal] and supper. The tablecloth had originally hung down to the ground all round the table and was used by all as a napkin; but around 1660, a separate napkin for each guest became the custom. By about 1648, the plate had definitely replaced the wooden platter or the slice of bread as a support for each person’s food; and by 1665, it had become customary to lay clean plates for each course.

In some ways, Versailles seems to have been more primitive than Paris. Louis XIV is said by some to have eaten with his fingers to the end of this life, but in Paris the fork was in fairly general use by the 1650s. In the earlier part of the reign of Louis XIV, soup was not served in plates but in a bowl from which each guest helped himself. Successive books on civility show the gradual development of a feeling of repugnance for this method and concern themselves with advising the young man to wipe his spoon before dipping it into the common dish after having once used it. Until the second half of the century, meat was still being served cut into pieces, to which diners helped themselves with their fingers. In 1658, Mademoiselle objected to the courtiers helping themselves from the same dish as the king; but she did so on the grounds of respect, not of hygiene.

Among the aristocracy, meals tended to be gargantuan. In 1681, the king's minister, Louvois, offered a dinner in honor of the queen. The dinner consisted of four services, but each service consisted of forty dishes. Cooking methods were certainly different from those for which France later became famous. A recipe of the period involved placing different kinds of meat and fowl in the same cauldron and boiling them together for up to twelve hours. They would then be served strongly larded with spices, musk, amber, and various perfumes. Possibly this may shed some light on the difficulty De La Salle experienced in accustoming himself to the unadorned food of the early Brothers.<sup>88</sup> The most favored dish of the day was fresh green peas. Great ladies would consume platefuls of them in their rooms at Versailles. In 1660, Louis XIV had a consignment of them sent from Italy, packed in herbs and roses to keep them fresh.

Wine was drunk young. The practice of letting it age seems to have been unknown or impracticable in the seventeenth century. Most of the wine drunk at Parisian tables would have come from the vineyards that were still to be found on the slopes surrounding the city. Champagne was, at the beginning of the century, a still red wine from the area around Rheims. It evolved into the modern drink only around 1695. Cider was drunk, especially in Normandy, but was considered by other Frenchmen to be "God's judgment on those rascally Normans."

But for most people in France, food and drink were very simple. Agricultural techniques did not permit a production that went much beyond the level of bare subsistence except in some good years; and for very many years of the seventeenth century, it fell far short of the minimum necessary to sustain the population. Crop failures were endemic. The years 1693-1694 and 1709-1710 were disastrous years for food production; and when food of any kind was both scarce and expensive, most of France starved. We know, from the biographer Blain, that the Brothers in Paris often had nothing to eat all day at this period.<sup>89</sup> At the best of times, wheaten bread was a luxury food. Peasant food consisted largely of black bread, soups, milk products, beans, chestnuts, peas, lentils, with eggs and occasionally bacon and poultry. By "soup" was meant something more like our stew, containing much more solid food than the modern soup.

The 1718 manuscript *Rule for Brother Director of a House of the Institute*<sup>90</sup> tells us much about the food of the first Brothers. The food served to the Brothers, we are told, must be plain, ordinary, and always the same. Flesh of fowl was allowed only for the sick; fish could be bought only if it was cheaper than eggs; otherwise, meat should be the "butcher's meal." On the days when meat was allowed, there would be six ounces per Brother per meal. Breakfast consisted of a piece of bread and a small quantity of wine. Dinner (at mid-day) consisted of a "soup," a

portion of boiled meat, and a dessert or salad. At supper, they could have fricasseed or stewed beef or baked meat. A refreshing dessert could be served in summer when there was a glut of fruit or of lettuce. But roasts and cakes should not be served unless they had been given to the community out of charity. It might be mentioned that in the seventeenth century, a “roti” often meant something more than a piece of roast meat. It was more like a “mixed grill.” The poet Boileau mentions a “roast” which consisted of a hare, six chickens, three rabbits, and six pigeons. A cookery book of 1674 criticizes such “mountainous roasts.”

Courtin’s chapter on meals is relatively short. He addresses it to a young man about to appear at court who might find himself invited out to dinner “by a person of quality.” He also assumes that the young man will have many opportunities to see from others how to behave at table. Observation of others, Courtin tells him, is better than precepts. It is important for a young man to know how to carve since the guest could well be asked to perform his task, but Courtin thinks it would be tedious to explain all these details of carving and knowledge of the most succulent parts of the animal or fowl. In any case, such a textbook would be more appropriate to a “carving butler” and these “are now out of fashion.” It is easy to learn how to carve “when one has eaten three or four times with some family of quality.”

However, other details are not spared, most of them common to the books on civility since the time of Erasmus. Do not make a noise scraping the last remnants of your food from the plate with your spoon. Do not scrape the plate clean with your fingers. Do not spit out food, but remove it from your mouth without being seen since if the food is so hot that it burns your mouth “civility requires you to be polite but does not require you to commit suicide.” A common seventeenth-century superstition is mentioned: do not be afraid of passing the salt or of sharing a plate of brains. Table napkins should not be used until they are as dirty as a kitchen rag and disgusting to those who behold them. It is now assumed that there will be serving spoons in the dishes. This is “now the custom in many places”; but if there are none, one must wipe one’s own spoon before dipping it into the common dish since “there are some people so delicate the they would not wish to take the soup into which you have put your spoon after having had it in your mouth.” There is still some uncertainty as to whether all will have their own “couvert.” Knives, forks, and spoons should be wiped on the napkin or handed to the lackey to be washed between services.

Above all, one must not eat so greedily that one is out of breath “like a broken-winded horse panting with exhaustion.” The wine glass must not be filled. When one wishes to drink, one makes a discreet sign to the wine lackey who will pour some wine into one’s glass. This must then be drunk in one draught, but slowly and deliberately. Do not drink in gulps that the others can hear and count; and after drinking, one should not utter a loud gasp of satisfaction. During the meal, hats should be worn, “this being the custom, so that to do otherwise would make one appear like a novice in society.”

Finally, Courtin has some sagacious advice for the host, or more probably hostess, when things go wrong. Always prepare a banquet thoroughly, and then let things take their course. If something goes amiss, apologize for it to the guests. They should be able to understand that such things can occur. But “to get angry with one’s servant, to shout at him, to beat him in the

presence of a person of higher rank than oneself, would be to show great disrespect for such a guest.”

As with his other major sections of *Decorum & Civility*, De La Salle begins his chapter on eating habits with a consideration of general (Christian) principles. He is writing for a broad spectrum of society, and not like Courtin for the few young men who would expect to make their way at court. De La Salle is concerned to see the connection between the activity and the ceremonies of eating and drinking and the message of the gospel by whose maxims every Christian must shape his life. “A Christian must do all for the glory of God.” This is the introductory principle. But in eating and drinking, man has a natural inclination to pander to his own selfish interests and, in so doing, to reduce himself not merely to a sub-Christian level but even to a sub-human level, to the level of beasts.

This could have been a commonplace; Courtin also said this. But De La Salle goes further. If one is interested in good manners and the behavior of that ambiguous creature of seventeenth-century life, the “honnête homme,” the man of the seventeenth-century world, it is not for the sake of worldly success. It is because De La Salle sees the “rules” of propriety and good behavior as working in the same direction as the gospel maxims, in imposing self-restraint on man’s selfishness and on his passions. Thus, the worldly-wise man of distinction does not permit himself to enthuse over the meals he has eaten. It is neither gentlemanly (honnête) nor fitting (bienséant) to spend one’s time talking about food. It was “as an insult” that the Jews accused Jesus of being fond of food and drink, of eating and drinking with the tax collectors and sinners.<sup>91</sup>

From this, De La Salle goes on to some comments on unseemly practices which no gentleman should permit himself, which no Christian should follow. It is improper to have the table permanently laid out as though already ready for a meal, standing prepared “like an altar to one’s stomach.” It is not gentlemanly (honnête) to eat and drink at all hours; the man of good manners and good sense regulates his mealtimes exactly. The growing custom of adding to dinner and supper two other meals, breakfast and an afternoon meal at which people are said to eat and drink to excess, is criticized as unworthy of a gentleman who should content himself with a light breakfast – some bread and wine – and two full meals a day. The custom of offering a visitor something to drink is not proper. Only peasants would urge someone to drink when he has no cause to be thirsty. Dinner parties are acceptable and must be given; and it is fitting to attend them, but rarely rather than often. In all these matters, De La Salle notes, “the ordinary practice of good society (honnêtes gens) is to be followed so that all excess may be avoided. In this way, the rules of polite living agree with those of Christian morality.

The ten articles on table manners and customs deal with: the ceremonial washing before the meal; the articles to be used at table; the offering and receiving of food at table; carving; eating properly; eating soup; serving bread and salt; what to do with bones, sauce, and fruit; drinking; leaving and serving the table.

Before any formal meal, hands were washed at a bowl brought by a servant. No reason of hygiene is given for this practice; it is simply a matter of custom. Lest people should remember

the Lord's words criticizing the Pharisees for their frequent washing and their inner filth,<sup>92</sup> De La Salle stresses that it was only their excess that was condemned by Jesus.

Then follows some typical seventeenth-century thought. The order in which the guests or members of the family wash their hands is to be determined by their rank in the family or among the guests. If all are more or less equal, then after various gestures of politeness and deference to one another, they could wash their hands almost at the same time. But if there is a person of superior quality present, the towel must be presented to him and held while he is drying his hands. That all this is a ceremony in which the guests signify by the order of washing their mutual relationship within the social hierarchy is evident from the remark that, if one's hands are very dirty, then it would be better to wash them before coming into the dining room.

Each must then take his place at table with careful regard for respective social ranks, rather like dons at a college high table assessing one another's seniority. The young man is warned to remember the gospel and to put himself in the lowest place.<sup>93</sup> All stand for the grace before meals to be said. It must be said by a priest if one is present for it is "forbidden by canon law" for a layman to say grace in the presence of a priest. If no priest is present, then the senior layman says grace but certainly not a woman, in the presence of men, although a child may be deputed to perform this office. If no one is willing to say grace, each must say his own; but this is something "that really ought not to occur in a Christian society." When grace has been said, one may sit; but one must keep one's head uncovered until the person of highest rank has covered himself. Then all must cover themselves. Politeness requires the wearing of a hat during a meal!

During the meal, one should sit upright and not lean on the table. It is interesting to note how De La Salle passes without any semblance of discomfort from the gospel maxim to take the lowest place<sup>94</sup> to a typically seventeenth-century attitude of disapproval of people "who are undistinguished by their quality" but who nevertheless presume to occupy the first places. It seems to be a clear statement relative to the two elements that composed his habitual outlook: the spirit of the New Testament and the traditions of his background. Holiness built on nature; grace transforming but not destroying. Today, the gospel would be interpreted differently, not because it is a different gospel but because we are different men. It is only from each man's focal point in the universe and within the story of his own life that each man can respond to the call of the Lord and to the maxims of the gospel. It is a value of this book on civility that we can continually pick up traces that reveal how one man, who by his wholehearted and total acceptance of the gospel call, opened himself fully to the action of the Spirit within the concrete reality and limitations of life as he knew it.

The second section of this chapter of *Decorum & Civility* deals with the things that must be used at table. "It would be quite contrary to good manners (*honnêteté*) to do without any of these things." Yet there still appears to be some uncertainty that in fact all will have them. The hesitations of a transitional period are to be seen in the confusion that seems to arise from the expectancy that all will be provided with certain implements and the assumptions that some people may yet behave as though they did not have them.

De La Salle says that everyone will have his own napkin, knife, fork, and spoon as well as a plate in front of him with a knife, fork, and spoon on its right. Despite this, their use was not

universal in the eighteenth century; and there is still the usual advice on how to wipe greasy fingers and on the importance of wiping clean the fork or spoon before offering them to another. The use of the fork seems not to be completely understood. "It is a matter of good manners (of *honnêteté*) always to use the fork to carry meat to the mouth." On the other hand, one does not use the fork to eat "liquids," by which is presumably meant the rather solid soups of the day. Similarly, earlier customs are recalled in the warning not to use the tablecloth as a napkin or to wipe spoons or forks on it. On the contrary, the modern usage is to keep the tablecloth spotless, soiled by "neither water nor wine nor sauce or food of any sort." The vulgarities that formerly occurred in the use of the tablecloth are now transferred to the napkin. "It is bad manners (*malhonnêteté*) to use the napkin to wipe one's face; it is even worse to clean one's teeth on it; and it would be one of the vilest faults against civility to use it as a handkerchief." The repetition of these warnings with regard to the use first of the tablecloth and later of the napkin in over a century and a half of *civilities* makes it clear that, even in what was then called aristocratic or polite society, such social gaffes did occur.

The satirist La Bruyère, writing in 1689, gives a cartoonist's impression of the manners of the seventeenth-century glutton at table:

Gnatho lives for himself alone, and the rest of mankind does not exist as far as he is concerned . . . he forgets that the meal is for the rest of the company as well as for himself; he takes possession of every dish and appropriates every course; he will not settle for one dish until he has tried them all; he helps himself with his fingers, handles and re-handles the food, pulls it about and tears it apart, treating it so that the other guests, if they want to eat, will have to eat his leavings. He spares them none of these disgusting exhibitions that can spoil the most ravenous appetite . . . if he helps himself to a ragout out of one dish, he spills it, on the way, into another dish and over the tablecloth; he leaves a trail along the tablecloth; he eats nosily; he rolls his eyes; he treats the table like a manger . . .<sup>95</sup>

De La Salle's next article could be entitled, "how to be the perfect host." His guide in this and in the advice he gives to the would-be guest is taken from the diplomat-courtier Courtin, other than whom he could not have found a better guide. De La Salle has already made the point that inviting, and being invited, to dinner parties are normal features of polite living. His aim in this article is to show what makes the perfect host or hostess and also the well-bred guest. It is easy for the reader to establish from the advice and warnings De La Salle gives, the sort of lapses and vulgarities that were all too common in the Golden Century of the Sun King, even in a society that regarded itself as "honnête."

We find the same ideas in Courtin. De La Salle copies his remarks about guests who cannot carry their wine, who easily lapse into intemperance, and as Courtin adds, "whose inebriations would present a strange spectacle especially if, for example, they were ecclesiastics or magistrates, people from whom one would expect good or sober example. Here again, as we have more than once seen in *Decorum & Civility*, De La Salle avoids any criticism of the clergy, omits any reference, even indirectly, to the worldly and often scandalous lives of the foppish abbés who frequented the salons of society ladies and vied with the best in turning a pretty sonnet. De La

Salle limits himself to giving a general warning against urging those with weak heads to drink too much.

It is, he writes, for the host or hostess to press their guests to eat well, to have another helping; it is not for other guests so to do. This can best be done by courteous suggestions or by offering the dish, although the best way to urge their guests to eat well is by showing genuine pleasure at seeing one's guests really enjoying their meal for "one must, when one has invited people to dinner, encourage them to eat well"; but one should do so only occasionally since to repeat this invitation too often would only cause embarrassment.

De La Salle then, following Courtin, passes on to consider the behavior appropriate when one positively dislikes the food that is served. He repeats Courtin's comments that dislike of food is often simply a fad or fancy that should be corrected in childhood, a reference to the no-nonsense method of bringing up children in the seventeenth century. But what, for Courtin, is merely a maxim of conventional wisdom on the upbringing of children, is turned by De La Salle into a much longer consideration of the problem facing someone who experiences a genuine revulsion at what is served. Here one feels immediately that there is a touch of the auto-biographical, for De La Salle himself had had the personal experience of being suddenly plunged into the world of the poor, of the poorly fed, when he left his own home to live with the first school teachers to share the discomforts of their life of poverty in order to raise them to his own ideals.<sup>96</sup>

The means of curing such repugnance for certain foods, he now declares, not in the manner of Courtin as a wise maxim, but as a matter of personal experience, is to go hungry "for some days" for "hunger makes everything seem good." "One must, as far as possible, become accustomed to eating everything that is served; and the way to do so is to have oneself served with the very food for which one has an aversion, especially after one has spent time without eating." This is a description by a saint of the manner in which he cured himself of the repugnance he felt for the food he forced himself to share with his first teachers, all men of humble birth. However, having for a short time poured out his own soul, De La Salle immediately reverts to the subject of his chapter – good manners at a dinner party.

What should one do if one is a guest and cannot abide the food served? The solution is simple. If one's aversion for the food is insurmountable, one does not refuse the dish offered; but one takes the first opportunity to have the plate quietly removed by the lackey. De La Salle is obviously mindful of Courtin's wry comment that politeness – how to survive in the world of the "honnête homme" – imposes certain constraints but does not require one to commit suicide! The self-immolation of which De La Salle spoke and which he practiced was for the saints, the perfect Christians. The worldly wisdom of the "honnête homme" was thus turned into the Christian wisdom of one for whom the following of Christ was not just part of life but the all of life.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that the qualities associated with the term "honnête homme" were social rather than moral. Nevertheless, writers of the numerous books on civility who popularized these qualities and presented them as ideals, at first for the children of the aristocracy and later for the middle classes, added a moral significance to what was a peculiarly social phenomenon. Church writers were quick to see that the restraints imposed by the conventions of the day on a highly structured social code of conduct could be put to good

Christian use; and there could be an easily established “a posteriori” connection between such restraints and the Christian attitude toward the control of a person’s lower and selfish tendencies.

But Christian wisdom also leads to sensitivity, to consideration of the feelings of others. One is frequently left with the impression that the motivation of all acts of politeness was solely the consideration of matters of deference, of social rank, of hierarchy. This was certainly an important element in social life in that period; and we have already noticed that to ignore such considerations was to invite social ostracism or worse, even physical violence.

But in this section, it is noteworthy how De La Salle insists that the criterion of good behavior is consideration for the feelings of others. Do not importune people by offering them food or drink they do not want. Do not embarrass friends by a thrusting hospitality. Do not make them feel uncomfortable. We lift here one of the edges of the veil that sometimes, perhaps often, seems to obscure the personality of the Founder; and we perceive his basic kindness toward others that was so evident to the early Brothers and to the pupils of his schools. Clumsiness of behavior is unacceptable not primarily because it offends “rules of polite living,” the code of the world of the “honnête homme,” but because it is an embarrassment to others, an insensitivity to their feelings, therefore to their persons, in whom, as De La Salle said in the preface of this work, God is to be seen.

Much of De La Salle’s *Decorum & Civility* remains in the area of worldly wisdom. Most of the long chapter on table manners deals with conventions that were already established or were in the process of being established during his lifetime, at the end of the seventeenth century. Olives are to be picked up with a spoon, not a fork, remarks De La Salle, a piece of information that could have saved the conman known as the Marquis de Ruffec from a term of imprisonment.

The best part of the capon is the breast, and the legs are better than the wings. The best beef is a mixture of fat and lean. Roast pigeons are served either whole or cut down the middle. The wings are the most succulent part of birds that scratch the ground, but the legs are preferred for birds that fly. The most desirable parts of a suckling pig are the skin and the ears. In hares and rabbits, the saddle, legs, and shoulders are the best. In a loin of veal, the kidneys are the best part; whereas in fish the head is most esteemed, except for fish such as sole when the middle is certainly best. Fruit should be served partially peeled, with the peel replaced to cover the fruit.

Children should be the last to start eating but the first to finish. Close your mouth when eating so as “not to lap up food like pigs.” Do not eat so fast as to develop a hiccup. Do not eat with both hands, gnawing a bone like a dog that holds it between its paws. Do not smell the food or give it to others to smell. If the food does smell bad, do not attract attention to this. Bones, eggshells, fruit skins, and pits should be left at the side of the plate. The suggestion of earlier books on civility that they could be dropped on the floor was now in 1703 rejected by De La Salle as “quite unbecoming.”

The eating of soup has a four-page article to itself. Soup is now served in a dish in which spoons are placed for the guests. Each helps himself to a spoon, pours some soup into his own bowl, and eats it with the spoon thus provided. The bowl has handles that should not be held with one hand while eating “as though you feared that someone might take it away from you.” In eating soup

(the thick “potage” of the time), the fork is held in the left hand to assist in conveying the larger morsels to the mouth.

The eating of bread was also accompanied with a certain degree of ceremony. It should be placed on the left side of the plate. It was “bad manners” to place it elsewhere. It was ill-mannered to remove the crust and eat only the soft inside of the loaf; but if one had such bad teeth that one could not eat the crust, then it might be removed, but a little at a time. The proper way to eat boiled eggs was by dipping suitably prepared pieces of bread into the egg, but bread should not be dunked into wine to make a sort of soup unless the doctor has prescribed this as a “certain and indeed almost unique remedy.”

As for salt, De La Salle repeats Courtin’s warning about current superstitions. “One must not allow oneself to be influenced by the foolish ideas of some who would not dare to offer salt to other people . . .” Bones should not be broken with the knife or banged on the table or shaken to extract the marrow. The latter should be extracted with the point of a knife or the handle of a spoon. Fruits, preserves, and other desserts should be eaten in moderation. Children should not “make signs with their eyes or shoulders, which reveal their impetuous desire for these delicacies.”

The drinking of wine is surrounded by as many rules as taboos. One should not drink before the soup has been eaten, nor with one’s mouth full. The custom was to ask the servant by a discreet sign each time one wished to drink. The servant would pour into the glass just enough wine to be drunk at one draught, it being impolite to leave any over in the glass. It is bad manners to taste the wine first and then expatiate on its qualities since the “honnête homme” does not make a show of being knowledgeable in matters of wine. It is improper to drink without one’s hat on one’s head; but if a person of great quality drinks to the health of a person of lower quality, the latter should uncover his head.

Good manners require that water be mixed with wine. It is customary to toast one another, mainly among good friends; but to have repeated toasts in order to make people drink “smacks of the public inn” and is not a custom of people of good breeding (honnêtes gens). In toasting a superior, it is impolite to address him by his name or personally as in “To your health, my lord.” One should rather say “To your lordship’s health” or “My lord, to the health of your lordship’s wife.” Finally, a note for the children who would read the book. A child must never offer a toast unless told to do so.

The final section on table manners deals with leaving the table and serving the table. It seems, from the information given, to have been written for those who serve at table and clearly differentiates the readers of De La Salle’s book from those who would be likely to read Courtin’s. A large number of the populations were employed in service in the houses of the rich, and this would be one of the openings available to the children who frequented De La Salle’s schools.

Precise information is given to them on how to serve at table, where to stand, how to present wine glasses, how to remove and present plates, not forgetting to wipe the underside lest the tablecloth be dirtied. In normal meals, clean plates should be served twice: after the soup and

before the dessert. But at dinner parties, a clean plate should be given at each of the “services” or as often as necessary, when the plates became overburdened with remains.

And finally, when all is over, the candles must be extinguished; but not in the presence of the guests, who could be disturbed by the smoke.

### **Chapter Ten: *Decorum & Civility on Visits***

One must leave everything to receive a visitor. If it is a person of higher rank or with whom one cannot be familiar, one must remove one’s dressing gown, one’s night cap, leave one’s meal, take one’s sword if one is entitled to such, and put a cloak over one’s shoulder.

As soon as one is warned that a person to whom one owes great respect has arrived on a visit, one must go to the door, or if the visitor has already entered the house, go as far as one can to receive him . . .<sup>97</sup>

When the people who are paying one a visit leave the house, one should accompany them outside the main door. If the person one is showing out has to enter a carriage, one must not leave him until he has entered it; and if it is a lady, one must help her to climb inside.<sup>98</sup>

If the host is with several persons, some of whom are leaving and others remaining, and if the person who is most important is leaving, then one must accompany him out; if the person leaving is of lower rank, one must let him go and remain with the others, but apologize to him; if the person (leaving) is of equal rank, one should examine whether he or the others (remaining), all things considered, should receive more consideration or would have a greater claim to one’s courtesy and thus be accompanied out, or should otherwise remain with those who are in this manner superior.<sup>99</sup>

To help one discern and make a choice among seats, it is useful to mention that the most honorable is the armchair . . . after the armchair comes the straight-backed chair, and after that comes the stool . . .<sup>100</sup>

All the manuals of civility have a substantial number of articles on that most French and most seventeenth century of occupations, making and receiving visits. Every detail of such an activity was prescribed, and the slightest departure from the expected etiquette was capable of arousing either mirth or contempt or even the anger that could lead to a duel. For the meeting of people in one another’s houses or palaces or even churches gave rise to endless squabbles over precedence.

When John Baptist de La Salle was a child, he must have been witness to an unedifying argument over precedence in the cathedral of Rheims between the town councilors and officers (among them his father) and the canons of the cathedral on the occasion of the celebration of the occupation of Dunkirk by the French in 1658. Ten years later in 1668, when John Baptist de La Salle had been a canon of the cathedral for eighteen months, a similar scene occurred. This time

it was the cathedral chapter that began singing the *Te Deum* ordered by the king without waiting for the archbishop (Barberini) to arrive. The latter protested and ordered the canons to start the *Te Deum* again on a day and at a time chosen by the archbishop. The chapter obeyed since it was the will of the king to which they were submitting within their cathedral, and not that of the archbishop or town council.

Perhaps the most frequent cause of dispute was the question of the “chair.” Who would be invited to sit and in which chair – the armchair, the chair without arms, or the three-legged stool – and who would be left to stand, or in certain circumstances, to sit on the floor? When state or diplomatic visits were being arranged, long skirmishes over the chairs on which different members of each party would sit preceded the meetings and often resulted in bitter diplomatic wrangling. The memoirs of the period are replete with long accounts of the furious battles between members of the king’s family over the rights to sit on a certain chair, to have both leaves<sup>101</sup> of a door opened instead of only one, to enter a room without being announced, etc.

In 1704, the year after De La Salle’s *Decorum & Civility* was published, neither princes of the blood nor royal dukes were able to attend the adoration of the cross on Good Friday because the king found it impossible to resolve their quarrels over precedence at the service. The comic playwright Molière makes use of the skirmishing that accompanied the use of the armchair or the simple chair or the lowly stool to achieve comic effects as, for example, in his play *Don Juan*.<sup>102</sup> Don Juan, the anti-hero of the play, is visited by M. Dimanche, his tailor, to whom he is in debt and who has come determined to make him pay up. Don Juan prevents him from even mentioning the matter of his debt by overwhelming him with civilities and, by particular, by offering him an armchair:

Don Juan:	Ah! M. Dimanche, how delighted I am to see you.
M. Dimanche:	Your servant, Sir. I have come to . . .
Don Juan:	Quick, a seat for M. Dimanche . . . Away with that stool; bring an armchair.
M. Dimanche:	Sir, you are laughing at me.

They continue with a battle of politeness as to whether M. Dimanche will sit in the armchair or not. In the dispute over politeness and deference, M. Dimanche is unable to mention the matter of the debt until finally he is shown out, again with full ceremony. The *civilities* of Courtin and De La Salle will make the point that one must never give anyone an honor which is above his rank, for to do so might be to mock him.

The intricacies of French etiquette posed a problem to the English government when King William III of England wished to send an embassy to Paris in 1698 to try to persuade the French king to cease harboring English refugees who were the supporters of the Stuarts<sup>103</sup> and who were credited with planning to assassinate King William. Lord Portland was chosen for this mission because he was one of the few men in England who were conversant with all the finer details of French manners and especially with the mysteries of the armchair, the door, the coach, and thus able to make an impression on the French in an area in which they took special pride.

He arrived in Paris in January 1698 when the Seine was frozen over and France was suffering from famine. Louis XIV, wishing to show his respect for the envoy of the Dutchman who was now king of England, sent his own lord-in-waiting to call on Portland with the compliments of the king of France. This nobleman, representing the king, received the full treatment from Portland: the hand, the armchair, the coach (escorted to it, helped in, seen off).

When he had gone, the Marquis de Villacerf arrived representing the Duchess de Boulogne, the first lady, the queen being dead. Boneuil, the chief of protocol, wanted Portland to go halfway down the stairs to meet the marquis. Portland refused to go further than the antechamber. There followed a violent scene in which the furious Boneuil hit the banister with his cane. Messengers flew to and fro between the marquis at the door and Portland in his room. Finally, Portland agreed to go two steps down the stairs and the marquis agreed to come up. But more trouble ensued at the departure. Portland accompanied the marquis downstairs (the door) but did not wait to see him depart (the coach). Boneuil was beside himself with rage. He went so far as to seize the ambassador's coattails, but Portland shook him off and left him. Portland deliberately met the French on their own ground, that of courtliness and civility, in order to make his point that the ambassador of King William was to be accorded the honors due to a monarch, a point not lost on the French who were still treating the exiled Stuart monarch as the king of England.

It is of such matters that, following Courtin, De La Salle treats in the twenty-six pages he devotes to visits: on the obligation of paying visits, on how to enter the house of a person one is visiting, on how to greet a person one is visiting and how to sit and to get up, on how to take one's leave, how to receive visitors, how to greet a visitor and how to see him depart.

People who live "in the world," De La Salle says, cannot dispense themselves from the necessity of receiving and making visits. This is an obligation of good manners. He immediately instances a scriptural precedent, Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth. "Jesus Christ also made a number of visits out of pure charity although he had no obligation to do so." Christian politeness should base itself on justice and charity as the criteria for deciding when to visit. Visiting would then be a necessity or a sign of respect or a way of maintaining union and charity.

Thus piety, justice, and good manners make it an obligation for a son to visit a sick father. Here De La Salle, the good teacher, spells out the generalities of his earlier statements for the children who would read his book. Reconciliation is another motive for visiting, as also are concern for the salvation of one's neighbor or the desire to be of some help to him or to pay one's respects to a superior or to preserve Christian unity. It was for these reasons that Christ visited Zacchaeus, Martha, the leader of the synagogue, the house of Peter, the centurion, etc.

However, a man whose behavior is sensible and well-regulated does not permit himself to spend his time flitting from one visit to another, nor does he make himself a nuisance by outstaying his welcome. From the comedies of his time as well as from the memoirs left by society ladies, it is clear that instances of the man or the woman who spent their lives visiting were far from being uncommon in the seventeenth century. Indeed, for high society, making and receiving visits were almost the sole occupation apart from the hours spent beautifying oneself in preparation for such visits.

The author of the Lyon *Civility* condemns such a turmoil of vain activity as “a state of damnation.” De La Salle, with his customary balance and good sense, avoids such excess of language. A Christian life should be regulated, a typical seventeenth-century word; but for De La Salle, the rule to be followed in deciding when to visit is not that of worldly prudence but “the rule of the gospel.” For Courtin, it is a matter of good breeding to know when to visit. It is an expression of one’s refinement. For De La Salle, it is a question of justice and of Christian charity based on the rules of the gospel.

Having established the principle that should underpin all expression of such civility, De La Salle goes on to consider the ways in which one shows one’s knowledge or one’s ignorance of accepted behavior in the manner a visit is to be made or received. From his book, the whole pattern of courtly or genteel behavior, as it was understood in seventeenth-century France, could be reconstituted.

It was bad manners to knock at a door. One “scratched” at it. Then one announced one’s name with the title “Monsieur.” One does not walk up and down in the antechamber while waiting, nor does one whistle or sing. When seated, one must be careful not to sit with one’s back to the portrait of the person one is visiting. One must remain with head uncovered while waiting. When the person one is visiting enters the room, one must greet him with reverence; and there are three ways of doing this.

De La Salle describes in minute detail ways in which the hat was swept to the floor, how to slide the foot back, how to bend the body. The stage directions are there in the greatest detail for any actor learning to play a seventeenth-century part. Another way of greeting is the embrace and the kiss. That people should greet one another with a kiss, writes De La Salle, was “much in use in the early church among the faithful, who thereby gave expression to their deep unity and perfect charity.” It was thus that Saint Paul exhorted the Romans, and all those to whom he wrote, to greet one another. “But the reverence one makes should neither be affected, nor ridiculous nor cringing. One should not bow at every word one says.” “Women and girls wearing a mask must take the mask off when greeting someone. It is bad manners to retain the mask when greeting another.”

One remains standing until told to sit, and then one must choose a less important seat than that of the person one visits. “So that one will know what chair to take, it is appropriate here to mention that the most honorable is the armchair . . . after the armchair comes the chair, and after the chair the folding stool.” Around the fireplace, the first place is in the middle, the second is on the right, the third is on the left. In a room, the wall with the window is the more important place; and the wall with the door is the less honorable one.

It is unbecoming to sit on the bed when one is in the bedroom, and it is “an unpardonable familiarity to throw oneself on to the bed and to converse from that position.” Receiving a visit from one’s bed obviously refers to illness, but not always. It is said that the practice of receiving guests when reclining in bed dated from the early seventeenth century. This idea caught on in a most surprising way; and soon every society lady, from the queen on down, was receiving in this manner.

Very soon, great ladies built up their own circle of guests, according to their interest and standard. Poetry, gallantry, witty conversation, and a highly stylized standard of behavior became the hallmarks of these gatherings which, perhaps, did more even than the court itself, to propagate the ideals of the “honnête homme.” But they also were the favorite places of some of the libertines of the period, the scoffers of religion and morality.

De La Salle closes this article with a word of advice not to make oneself disagreeable to others, but also not to agree with what is clearly against the law of God. In these occasions, “one either leaves the company or one shows, by the control and seriousness of one’s expression, one’s distaste for such conversation.”

If one could not enter the houses of the great except through the minefield of courtly behavior, leaving their houses was no easy matter either and present another series of problems, both for the guest and for the host. De La Salle’s first piece of advice is a general one of universal application. Do not outstay your welcome. Know when to leave. That seems to be an easy matter, especially as he suggests ways of noticing that the time has come to depart: when the conversation flags, when the host calls for someone, or when someone enters to speak with him.

But the difficult part remains. How to exit with the grace and *savoir-vivre*<sup>104</sup> of the “honnête homme.” One must not leave without saying farewell, but one does not interrupt the host if he is now engaged with other people of high rank. In that case, one leaves quietly and discretely. But suppose the host, a person of high rank, insists on doing one the signal favor of escorting one to the door, or even to the coach, what then? We have seen how De La Salle has already noted that for a host to offer to do so without real motive could be interpreted as a mockery of his more humble guest. But such a favor could also be a sign of great respect and kindness.

Therefore, if the great man does insist on accompanying you out, do not persist in refusing this honor for to do so would be to suggest that he does not know how to behave. Allow him to accompany you, but act as though you assume he must be doing so “because he has business elsewhere.” If however it is quite clear that he is doing so to honor you, then turn and wait outside the door of the room until he has gone back in and shut the door. If he goes so far as to honor you with the coach and accompanies you to the door of your coach or to your horse, then you must walk away leading your horse or followed by your coach until the great man is either out of sight or back inside his house. Only then may you mount your horse or climb inside your coach.

So far, the Founder has been considering the problems facing the young man who is visiting. Now he turns to the behavior appropriate to the person who is visited. First, it is of the utmost incivility to keep his visitor waiting. One thinks wryly of the hours De La Salle was kept waiting at the door of the important ecclesiastical dignitaries on whom he was calling, sometimes even having to go away without seeing them after hours of waiting. The polite man will see that there is somewhere for the visitor to sit while waiting and will even send someone to talk with him while he is kept waiting.

An interesting glimpse of seventeenth-century life is revealed by the injunction in the next paragraph that, if the visitor is a person with whom one cannot be familiar, one should leave

“one’s indoor gown, one’s night cap, even one’s meal,” and, if this is appropriate to one’s condition, carry one’s sword in the belt and put a mantle over one’s shoulder.

The visitor must be received at the door of the house or, if he has already entered, one must go as far as possible to receive him and do him honor. The most honorable place in the house must always be given to the guest, unless he is an “inferior” who “could not accept without failing in his duty.” The host must always take a seat less honorable than that offered to the distinguished guest. If the family is at table when the visitor arrives, it is good manners to offer him a meal that the visitor should courteously decline. One should not show that one is bored with the visit; but if one has something urgent to be done, one could adroitly mention this in the conversation. The general rule of civility is to show thoughtful concern for others. The rest follows from that.

The departure of a visitor can, however, be a problem. Normally, the visitor should be accompanied as far as the front door of the house. If a coach is waiting, the host should wait until the visitor is inside the coach. But if the host is with several guests, there could be complications. When a person of great importance leaves, clearly the host goes to the front door with him and even to the coach. If the person leaving is not of such high rank as those remaining, the host takes leave of him from the room, apologizing for not being able to accompany him further. If however the person leaving is of equal rank with those remaining, then the host has to do some mental calculations and decide whether there are reasons why he is more beholden to one guest than to the others; and then one should either accompany him out or remain in the room according to this decision, an interesting example of the calculus of interests upon which society rested in the seventeenth century.

Finally, the host is reminded that a young person should not be left to go home alone, especially at nighttime. The young person should be escorted home by the host or by some other adult.

The final section in this chapter on visits examines the proper behavior to be adopted toward those who join or leave a social gathering. Again, this is a picture of seventeenth-century France. If a person of high rank arrives, the host excuses himself from the company with whom one is engaged and goes to pay his respects. But if the new arrival is of lower rank, the host merely acknowledges his presence with a courteous gesture. If the one arriving is of very high rank, then all must break off their conversation or their game of cards, remove their hats, and bow to him. Meanwhile, the host will offer the guest the seat that “is due to his quality.”

Even if it is only a “lackey” that comes to give a message, the one receiving the message should stand and remove his hat as a sign of respect to the lackey’s master. On the other hand, when someone leaves the company, all should stand and salute him in the “manner required by his rank.” When entering a room in which others are already seated, it is appropriate to take the “least honorable seat”; but one should accept a more honorable seat if pressed to do so, above all, “if there is no one in the company of a rank much above one’s own.”

## **Chapter Eleven: Conclusion**

It is easy when one first reads De La Salle’s *Decorum & Civility* to react with a feeling of superiority, of condescension, even of amusement. It is a book that has aroused the most diverse

comments. For two centuries a best seller at the level of schools and seminaries, it has now acquired an historical interest. In an age when prime ministers and presidents are on Christian-name terms almost from the first moment of their initial meeting, the elaborate ceremonial customs of France in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries appear artificial to the modern mind, contrived, even hypocritical. After all, it was a seventeenth-century contemporary who called “honnêteté” “that apparent civility practiced in society in the midst of hatred and envy.” And those were the words of a society lady well-placed to know. For the Anglo-Saxon world, especially, brought up on the studied casualness of the T-shirt and jeans culture, the importance attached at the time to seventeenth-century etiquette is well-nigh incomprehensible.

The elaborate ritual of visiting, eating, walking, riding in a coach, even of sitting and standing, is something foreign to twentieth-century ordinary people. And so critics, historians, litterateurs have assessed De La Salle’s work variously. For the social historian, it is a valuable source book of late seventeenth-century customs. By comparing De La Salle’s work with similar books – from the first civility published by Erasmus to those subsequent to De La Salle’s first edition of 1703 – some historians have interpreted the importance of De La Salle’s version both as an indication and as an agent of the great bourgeois revolution that was gradually overtaking Europe in the eighteenth century and have estimated its value as a disseminator of aristocratic, courtly standards of behavior among the developing middle classes of France, a development that would conclude with the wresting of political power by a triumphant bourgeoisie from the hands of the nobility.

Others, particularly in the nineteenth century, misunderstanding the Founder’s intentions completely, have deplored the lack of literary qualities in his *Decorum & Civility*, contrasting him unfavorably with Erasmus, with Mathurin Cordier,<sup>105</sup> with Nicolas Faret,<sup>106</sup> with Antoine de Courtin . . . and have seen nothing in his work but the pedantic trivialities of the professional pedagogue. It is easy, as some have done, to select sentences from different parts of the book and to deride the Founder for having ostensibly based his book on Christian principles only to develop these principles in insignificant and puerile precepts of elementary good manners. But it would be easy to select similar examples from the more literary *civilities*, from the early Jesuit translations of della Casa, even from Courtin.

De La Salle wrote an elementary textbook. What should surprise the careful reader, however, is not the wealth of detailed advice given to young people, most of which the good parent of today would gradually, by word or example, instill into his or her children, but the extraordinary amount of “unnecessary” information about aristocratic ways written down for “children of the artisans and the poor.” Either (1) the Founder expected his book to be read by a wider clientele than that of his schools for the poor, or (2) he assumed that his schools would take in a wider stratum of society than the very poor, or (3) he saw his children as finding gainful employment – perhaps as lackeys? – in the houses of the great and, therefore, needing to know their ways, or (4) he believed in the possibility of social progress and saw that his schools would not merely help poor children to earn their living in “their state of life” but would even help them to rise above that state. The answer would seem to partake of all four possibilities.

What is certain is that De La Salle was a man concerned with the world. He had not seen himself as having, from the start, a vocation to the religious life or the monastery. At one point, early on

in his career, he sought to divest himself of his canonry in order to take up the more humble duties of a parish priest, a definite step downward in the social scale. In a recent book written by a French theologian, the author<sup>107</sup> tells how the study of Newman's life and writings led the author to see that "it is impossible to seek Christian truth unless one seeks a truth fully incarnated in the whole human experience." This, too, was De La Salle's conviction. That is why the modern reader – not only of *Decorum & Civility* but of De La Salle's other works – is at a disadvantage unless he can visualize the world in which De La Salle lived and which was the whole area of his "human experience." De La Salle's life reveals that he was not a man who worked from dogmatic principles to doctrinaire solutions. Rather, he worked from the facts of human experience, as he knew them and from the Christian experience of the presence of God in the here and now, the "*sens du sacré*"<sup>108</sup>: God immanent and transcendent. Principles, of course, De La Salle had and very firm ones; but they were all reducible to one very simple principle, the spirit of the gospel.

The world of his experience was a France that had known a century of struggle, of internal disorder, of civil war, of religious strife, of foreign wars. It was a century of great social upheaval in which many changes had taken place, but it remained a century of conspicuous wealth and appalling poverty. Despite its glitter and the splendid monuments it has left us, it was not a happy century. De La Salle refers to it as "these unhappy times." When, in 1703, he was publishing *Decorum & Civility*, the sun was setting on Louis XIV's glory. The reign was sliding inexorably into social poverty, years of famine, military defeat, and gloom. The tinsel and the glitter were only on the surface. A society had emerged in which the external alone counted.

De La Salle did not ignore this. He endeavored to internalize it, to give real meaning and depth, Christian meaning, to this world of the "honnête homme." This is part of the meaning of *Decorum & Civility*. The way in which he tried to do this was as much a part of his upbringing, of the limitations of his own experience, under which all men labor, of his own social prejudices even, as of his conviction that Christianity and the world were both part of the same reality, God's reality. It is essential, he says, for the person living in the world to go visiting – for his Christian life is not that of the monk but must be lived out in the world and within the social conventions of the world. And so the elaborate ways which had developed in the seventeenth century, by which men and women had found it possible to live together harmoniously in society, were not only acceptable to the Christian. They must be infused with the spirit of the gospel for people to give dynamic unity to their lives in Christ.

The extraordinary complexity of the seventeenth-century code of good manners appears almost farcical to modern man. Much of this ritual of urbane behavior was a reaction against the coarseness, the violence, the brutality of an earlier period. It was a means of refinement keeping pace with the advancing standard of taste. This can be seen from a study of the various editions of the same *Decorum & Civility* or the various civilities published by different authors at different periods in time. As much as for ourselves, the Founder lived in a period of transition, a period known by the title of one book as "the crisis of the European conscience." It was a time of crisis, a time when men were uncertain of themselves or else so certain of their particular views that they were fiercely intolerant of the certainty of others, a world in which accepted views were questioned and challenged, debated and argued over.

In this world, manners, as much as words, could be signs, could convey meaning. Forms of social intercourse are built up and evolve in response to social pressures. It has already been remarked that “honnêteté” in the seventeenth century carried a social, not a moral, connotation. When men were ever ready to unsheathe their swords in defense of their “honor,” when people of high rank thought nothing of beating their servants in some fit of anger, the correct interpretation of social signs became a necessity of life.

A society had emerged in which every family was a small totalitarian state in which the individual counted for little, sometimes for nothing, the house for everything, in which every member’s duty was to increase the wealth and prestige of the family, a wealth based perhaps on trade but a prestige based on the possession of land and the enjoyment of “privileges” granted by the monarch which ensured their possessor the right to all the honors “due to his rank.” A state had emerged which had put an end to the anarchy of the early part of the century by concentrating power in the hands of one man, the king, acting through a small number of chosen bureaucrats.

Like the family, the state was a benevolent despotism: great nobles living uncomfortably in Versailles, just as much as the poor, rendered destitute by war or the failure of the harvest, turned to the king for the means to survive, each according to his own level of expectation of affluence or of poverty.

It must also be remembered that Versailles was not just a palace, it was also a barracks. For all those bewigged and powdered gentlemen, pirouetting around the Sun-King in Versailles, ever hopeful of catching his attention and of earning for themselves some gratuity, there were also his officers, the captains of his army. And war, in Louis’ times and because of Louis’ policies, was endemic. In his chapter of “talking and conversing,” De La Salle tells his young readers how to converse with a nobleman. It is impolite to say bluntly: “Monsieur, are you going to war?” The proper way is to say casually: “No doubt, Monsieur will be going on campaign . . .” Such, presumably, was the small talk of Versailles!

This dependence of the great families of France on one man, the king, for military splendor, for private wealth, and for public magnificence would appear to be a recipe for immobility; and yet, as we have seen, France was changing. Social progress was possible at nearly all levels of society. It is obvious that De La Salle was writing not only for the starving poor to whom he had originally turned his attention and to whom he had opened his heart. The immediate success of *Decorum & Civility* and the large number of editions produced in the eighteenth century are an indication of a reading public beyond the classrooms of the “artisans and the poor.” The first edition of 1703 simply states that *Decorum & Civility* is for “the use of the Christian schools.” By 1716, the title page declares the book to be “very useful for the education of children and of persons unacquainted with the politeness of society”! The publisher responsible for this addition had seen the appeal of the book to the rising middle class and the financial advantage to be gained by himself from a wider circulation.

The code of civility, of “proper behavior” and of urbane politeness, thus takes on a two-fold aspect. Viewed from one standpoint, it is the contrary of barbarity, a bulwark against the roughness and vulgarity of an earlier generation. It can be said that “civility” is a means of social

control. And yet from another point of view, it is a means of social advancement, itself an instrument of change in a society open to change, subject to the condition that one played according to the “rules of the game.”

In *Decorum & Civility*, it is of these “rules of the game” that De La Salle writes. But he does more than this. As a product of a particular society, he accepts the rules for what they are; but as a Christian and still more so, as a saint, genuinely inspired with the “spirit of the gospel,” he is able to see in them, as in all “human experience,” that “sens du sacré,” that awareness of the divine in life. Whilst he repeats the standard formula that this behavior is due to the respect owed a superior in the social hierarchy, indeed even to the respect owed to an inferior – one does not mock him by offering him an honor that is not due to his rank – he is nevertheless subtly but fundamentally changing the very grounds on which the “rules of the game” depend. For by basing the motivation of the respect due to others not on rank but on the presence of God in all, he is sidestepping the whole aristocratic principle and introducing a new dimension. If saints can be regarded as revolutionary insofar as they overturn the values of the world, then De La Salle was a revolutionary. It may be more in keeping with his own character to say that he was a reformer.

This is not to say that other writers of books of civility did not also include in their works references to God. From Erasmus to and beyond De La Salle, the Jesuit translators of della Casa, the Farets, and the Courtins were convinced and practicing Christians, even holy men. It has been noticed by social historians that references to Christian principles were almost de rigueur in books on civility. Read in separation from his other works of a more purely spiritual nature, De La Salle’s *Decorum & Civility* could indeed seem to be a little more than a conventional book on politeness, copied from others and expanded according to his own purposes, interspersed with conventional pious exhortations and aimed at the new mass market of the eighteenth-century middle class. It appeared as such to some his nineteenth-century critics.

But when one reads the book knowing the man from his biographies and his spiritual writings, one perceives that there is nothing conventional about De La Salle’s spiritual interpretation of the basis of the social conventions upon which civilized life, in its various manifestations, has always rested. De La Salle is penetrated with the “sens du sacré.” He is not writing for people in the world who are also Christians. He is writing, like Saint Paul whose authority he so often quotes, for the Christian whose life “in the world” must still be a hymn of praise to God. This is another dimension from occasional, even if deeply felt, references to Christian principles.

This is all the more striking as John Baptist de La Salle was living at a time when the basic principles of Christian living were not merely unclear, they were bitterly contested, not so much from without as from within the Catholic fold. As De La Salle says so plainly in his preface, the fact that people see no relationship between the codes of politeness (and let us repeat, he accepts their plurality) and Christian living is a proof that there is “little Christianity in the world and how few people there are who live and behave according to the spirit of Jesus Christ.”

The Council of Trent had striven hard to eradicate the superstitious, magical, idolatrous attitudes that passed for religion in so much of Europe. The education of the clergy had been taken in hand, and now all priests were expected to receive a serious theological training. From a better

educated clergy, trained in theology and steeped in genuine piety would come a more Christian people. Outstanding churchmen and saints, new religious orders and reformed older religious orders, missionaries – all cooperated in an enormous effort to purify the ranks of the clergy and to present to the ordinary man of the world the pure doctrine of Jesus Christ. But in doing so, some went too far. From beginning as a serious discussion on the respective roles of God's grace and man's responsibility, Jansenism became obsessed with a "pure Christianity," emerging both as a heresy and as a frame of mind that was to insert itself and assert itself in almost every area of French life and society for a least two centuries, persisting almost to this day, if not as a heresy, at least as an attitude of mind.

In practice, Jansenism soon established itself as an attitude, a lifestyle, a frame of mind, a state of "spiritual terror," an absolutist theory of religion in an absolutist era. Jansenism began as a kind of spiritual "Fronde" – the revolt against the monarchy in the first half of the seventeenth century – as a spiritual revolt against the corruptions of Christianity. De La Salle never mentions the corruptions of Christianity – only the lack of true Christianity. In particular, the Jansenists attacked the Jesuits for accepting, with Molina,<sup>109</sup> that Christianity could and should accommodate itself with the new humanism, with the world experience.

For the Jansenist, there was or should be such a thing as a "pure Christianity" uncontaminated with the world, the source of all evil. This fierce puritanism in its extreme form rejected all attempts to live the Christian life within the matrix of the world. The immanence of God was totally rejected in favor of God's transcendence. The true Jansenist could not live in the world; he could only withdraw from the world – to the solitude of Port Royal. For only the few could be saved, the elite who arrived at a state of pure Christianity. It was this gloomy outlook that led some of the noblest minds, such as Pascal, to retire to Port Royal, or such as Racine to cease all further productions of his theatrical genius.

The isolation of Port Royal was significant in many respects. Jansenism isolated itself not only from the world but from the universal church and thus became popular as a sign of opposition for those Gallicans who, for ecclesiastical or for political reasons, favored distancing themselves from Rome. We know De La Salle's views on this.<sup>110</sup>

Jansenism also isolated itself from history. There could be no question of any attempt to insert itself into society, still less to modify or influence the future. Jansenism was all or nothing. It could seduce people by its proud independence from Rome, its ideal of a return to scripture, its haughty disregard of established authority; but by its concentration on man's weakness, on the powerlessness of his will, on the corruption of nature, on predestination, it flung down an open defiance to all exiting ideas on society, on philosophy, on nature. Vincent de Paul relates a meeting with the Jansenist Abbé of Saint Cyran,<sup>111</sup> who told him that the plan of God was the destruction of the church as it then was.

De La Salle was wholly admirable in his attitude to the theological wasps' nest of Jansensim. His advice to his Brothers was stark in its simplicity. Leave these disputes of erudition to the erudite. Only in one section of *Decorum & Civility* does he seem to join forces with the Jansenists; and that is in his treatment of dancing, balls, theater, and popular street entertainments. But in this, he was simply voicing an opinion common among the clergy of the day, one shared by as amiable a

saint as Francis de Sales. A casual reference to a book written about the theater by one of the most urbane of seventeenth-century Jansenists, Pierre Nicole's *Traité de la Comédie*<sup>112</sup> would suffice to reveal the gap that existed between the thinking of De La Salle and Jansenistic pessimism. For Nicole, the "pleasure of the theater is an evil pleasure arising . . . from the depths of our corruption . . ." The theater is to be condemned because, being enjoyable, it makes us "abandon ourselves all the more easily to our own corruption . . ."

Nowhere in *Decorum & Civility* does De La Salle take such a dismal view of human nature. The whole emphasis of his book is on man's ability to discern the sanctifying presence of God in all things, a Christian humanism that the true Jansenist would have rejected as either impossible (except for a select few) or as hypocritical. De La Salle in his preface agrees that true Christianity is in short supply; but he then proceeds to show, by practical examples taken from the concrete facts of human experience, how this can be remedied in a civilized society. He does not accept that true Christianity is possible only to the elite; he is concerned to see it extended to the many.

It is this fine balance of his mind, his sense of proportion, his avoidance of exaggeration, his gentleness of approach that stands out in the reading of this book. It is all the more obvious by comparing De La Salle's *Decorum & Civility* with similar works written by his predecessors and contemporaries. De La Salle rejects the more rigorous attitudes and condemnations of other authors in favor of milder and gentler formulas. Always one senses the confessor behind the moralist. When as in the chapter on entertainments he is unusually severe in his remarks, harsh words are always attributed to a doctor of the church<sup>113</sup> almost as though they were being used regretfully and only by proxy.

It is for this reason that so much of this short study has been taken up by a comparison between De La Salle and other writers. Such a comparison enables us to notice and admire the human qualities we have remarked upon in De La Salle throughout this study: his moderation, his sense of proportion, his gentleness, his tact, the stress on reasonableness allied to clarity and simplicity of expression. For a similar reason, frequent references have been made to the social history of the time. What might appear to some as mere "antiquarianism" seems to the present writer to be an additional source for understanding and appreciating the mentality and the spirituality of a saint. For, despite his occasional yearnings for the quiet of the cloister, De La Salle did not withdraw from the world. He lived his life in the world. He saw God's action and God's plan gradually unfolding in the events of his life. He read the signs of his own times, and he responded accordingly.

One of his responses to these signs was the production of *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*. That he bothered to do so, indeed that he took so much time over it, would seem sufficient reason in this centenary year to cast a glance at this book in order to gain from it a little help in understanding the sort of world in which De La Salle lived and in which he found God incarnated in the "whole area of human experience."

## Notes

1. Brother Edwin McCarthy (1917-2002) was a Brother of the District of London, a sector of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools now incorporated with the District of England into what is known as the District of Great Britain. As a young De La Salle Brother, his ministry was in Vietnam (1938-1942). He is fondly remembered for his many years of ministry with Vietnamese immigrants in England and for his excellent translations into English of French-language Lasallian texts.

2. Brother William Mann, 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).

3. For *Règles de la Bienséance et de la Civilité Chrétienne* (1703) by John Baptist de La Salle, see *Cahiers lasalliens 19* (Rome, 1964).

4. In 1980-1981, the Brothers of the Christian Schools around the world celebrated the tercentenary of their foundation; and it was at this time that Brother Edwin McCarthy wrote this text, which has until now remained an unpublished manuscript.

5. *Cahiers lasalliens* (CL) is a collection published in Rome about the life of John Baptist de La Salle and the origins of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

6. This manuscript was written in the early 1980s before a more inclusive way of discussing our sharing of the patrimony of De La Salle had evolved in such a way that one now speaks of a gift shared with all Lasallians, Brothers and Partners alike.

7. Subsequent to the writing of this present study (which was completed in 1984), the whole book is now available in an English-language translation. See *The Rules of Christian Decorum Christian Decorum and Civility* by John Baptist de La Salle, translated by Richard Arnandez and edited by Gregory Wright (Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1990). Worth reading is the "Introduction" by Brother Gregory Wright on pages xi to xxiii.

8. The few references that were in fact given in the text by the author have been, for the most part, moved into the endnotes; and they have been supplemented in this editing of the manuscript with numerous other endnotes to help the reader better understand or situate references or remarks made by the author.

9. *Édition critique des "Règles de la bienséance et de la civilité chrétienne"* by Brother Albert-Valentin (Paris: Ligel, 1956).

10. *The Parish School* by Jacques de Batencour, a priest of the company of the parish Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet in Paris.

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

12. A bishop of Geneva and saint of the Roman Catholic Church (1567-1622) who is known for his writings on prayer and spirituality.

13. A French priest and saint of the Roman Catholic Church (1581-1660) who dedicated his life to serving the poor.

14. Cf. "Rules I Have Imposed on Myself" #3 in *Rule and Foundational Documents by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated and edited by Augustine Loes and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), page 199.

15. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536).

16. *A Handbook on Good Manners for Children*.

17. *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*, 1694.

18. *Galateo: The Rules of Polite Behavior* by Giovanni della Casa (1503-1556).

19. Please note that the manuscript was written in the early 1980s before it was common to use more inclusive language. The original text of the author was kept in this regard, especially since his quotations from the French language are of texts that are a few centuries old and even less likely to have used more inclusive language.

20. Obviously, the audience here is seventeenth-century young men.

21. "French kindness and courteousness."

22. *The Book of the Courtier* by Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529).

23. *The Civil Conversation* by Stefano Guazzo (1530-1593).

24. *On Duties* or *On Obligations* (44 BC) by Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC).

25. François de Malherbe (1555-1628).

26. A period of infighting between French Catholics and Protestant Huguenots (1562-1598).

27. Nicolas Faret (1596-1646).

28. "A virtuous man."

29. Charles de Saint-Évremond (1613-1703).
30. *Des Jugements* (1688) by Jean de La Bruyère (1645-1696).
31. Antoine Gombaud, Chevalier de Méré (1607-1684).
32. “Gallantry.”
33. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704), a French bishop and theologian.
34. *Letters* #336.
35. Antoine de Courtin (1622-1685), French diplomat and civil servant.
36. Cf. *The Introduction to the Devout Life*, originally published in 1609.
37. Cf. *Treatise on the Love of God*, originally published in 1616.
38. Pierre Nicole (1625-1695) was one of the more distinguished of the French Jansenists.
39. The Battle of Ramillies, a major engagement of the war of the Spanish succession, was fought on May 23, 1706.
40. In the context of this manuscript, the word “college” refers to the equivalent in terms of the age of the school population of a French seventeenth-century secondary school.
41. Nicolas Roland (1642-1678), a French priest and canon, was the spiritual director of John Baptist de La Salle. He founded the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus in Rheims in 1670 and, at the time of his death, entrusted this community to the care of John Baptist de La Salle.
42. Cf. the preface of *Decorum & Civility* (1990), page 3.
43. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part II, Chapter 6, Article 1, pages 97-98. This is obviously from one of the post-1703 editions of the book. In addition, please note that while there have been translations made of De La Salle’s works after the preparation of the manuscript by the author in the early 1980s, this text keeps in all instances the author’s own pre-publication translations of these texts.
44. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part II, Chapter 3, Article 5, page 55.
45. Cf. the preface of *Decorum & Civility* (1990), page 3.
46. *Meditation* #80.3.

47. Cf. *Rule and Foundational Documents by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated and edited by Augustine Loes and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002).

48. Marquise de Brinvilliers (1630-1676), a French murderer.

49. Charles Démia (1637-1689), a French priest and founder of primary schools in Lyons.

50. Cf. the preface of *Decorum & Civility* (1990), page 4.

51. By use of the term “religious,” reference is being made here to those living a consecrated life as members of Roman Catholic vowed communities.

52. Cf. the preface of *Decorum & Civility* (1990), page 4.

53. Cf. the preface of *Decorum & Civility* (1990), page 4.

54. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part I, Chapter 6, page 20.

55. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part I, Chapter 11, page 32.

56. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part I, Chapter 12, page 34.

57. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part I, Chapter 7, page 22.

58. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part I, Chapter 10, page 29.

59. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part I, Chapter 7, page 23.

60. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part I, Chapter 2, page 12.

61. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part I, Chapter 3, page 14.

62. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part I, Chapter 5, page 18.

63. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part I, Chapter 14, page 39.

64. The Estates-General was a legislative assembly of the different classes (estates) of French subjects.

65. Jean de La Bruyère (1645-1696), a French philosopher and satiric moralist.

66. Currency Court, suppressed in 1791.

67. A woman of the middle class.

68. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part II, Chapter 3, pages 48-56. Please note, however, that the order in which the quoted excerpts appear in this manuscript is not that of the original publication.

69. Chapter VIII, “De La Propeté,” 1679 edition.

70. Molière, *L'École des Maris*, Act 1, Scene 1.

71. Cf. Maurice-Auguste Hermans, “The Memorandum on the Habit” in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2013).

72. Noble French families.

73. Once again making clear the fact that De La Salle is a man of the seventeenth century.

74. A woman of the middle class.

75. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part II, Chapter 3, Article 2, page 50.

76. Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), a great French painter.

77. *The Imaginary Invalid*, a three-act comedy-ballet by the playwright Molière, first premiered in 1673.

78. *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

79. “See this woman” or “behold the woman.”

80. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part II, Chapter 5, page 84.

81. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part II, Chapter 5, Article 2, page 86.

82. Cf. *Rule and Foundational Documents by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated and edited by Augustine Loes and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002).

83. Ephesians 5:18.

84. Colossians 3:16.

85. “Civilized man.”

86. In ancient Roman culture, “infamia” was a technical term indicating the loss of legal or social standing.

87. Cf. the preface of *Decorum & Civility* (1990), page 3.

88. Cf. *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* by Luke Salm (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Publication, 1989), page 39.

89. Cf. *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* by Luke Salm (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Publication, 1989), pages 79, 145, 146.

90. Cf. *Rule and Foundational Documents* by John Baptist de La Salle, translated and edited by Augustine Loes and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), pages 207-217.

91. Cf. Mark 2:16.

92. Cf. Luke 11:39.

93. Cf. Luke 14:10.

94. Cf. Luke 14:10.

95. Jean de La Bruyère, *Les Caractères*, 4th edition, 1689.

96. Cf. *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* by Luke Salm (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Publication, 1989), pages 38-42.

97. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part II, Chapter 6, Article 6, page 105.

98. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part II, Chapter 6, Article 6, page 107.

99. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part II, Chapter 6, Article 6, page 107.

100. Cf. *Decorum & Civility* (1990), Part II, Chapter 6, Article 4, page 103.

101. A double door.

102. A play by Molière, which was first performed in 1660, based on the legend of the Casanova Don Juan.

103. After the victory of William's army at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, James II fled back to France where he died in 1701. He was the last Roman Catholic monarch to rule over England, Scotland, and Ireland.

104. Literally, "knowing how to live."

105. A teacher of John Calvin who lived from 1479 to 1564, he was a theologian, teacher, and humanist from Lausanne, Switzerland.

106. A French scholar, statesman, and writer who lived from 1596 to 1646.
107. Louis Bouyer, *Le Metier de Theologien* (Paris, 1979), page 15.
108. "Sense of the sacred."
109. Luis de Molina (1535-1600), a Spanish Jesuit priest.
110. Cf. *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* by Luke Salm (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Publication, 1989), pages 163-164, 176-177, 179, 190-192.
111. Jean de Vergier de Hauranne (1581-1643) was a French Catholic priest.
112. Pierre Nicole (1625-1695).
113. In the Roman Catholic Church, a "doctor of the church" is a title given to individuals recognized for their eminent learning and high degree of sanctity.