

◆ A History

In Mr De La Salle's day there was no talk of "Human Rights", and still less "Rights of the Child". In the language of the time there was an idea of *particular attention to the poor*. Such attention was fleshed out in observing the realities of XVIIIth century society. Everyone knows that this society suffered from very great social inequality, an inequality of which proof lay in the catalogue of complaints drawn up in the following century, a few years before the great Revolution of 1789.

John Baptist De La Salle's special concern for the poor denotes a spiritual attitude first of all. It emphasises the strong, loving regard for a section of the population which was in need. Today we would say that it is "humanitarian", meaning that it is interested in humanity in distress. In this respect, it is following the Christian tradition of love of one's neighbour, which is itself an image of God: "what you do to the least among you, you do it to me".

It also reveals the Lasallian spirituality of relationships with oneself, God, others which one is aware of in the formula "Faith, Service, Fraternity". Special concern for the poor is no more nor less than a mission which does not arise out of us, but is "a gift of God".

Deep concern for the poor does not come by itself. We need to be called in various ways, to rub shoulders with the poor, and going so far as to dare, gradually, to be immersed in the world of the poor. This is precisely what John Baptist De La Salle did. This step, spread over a period, caused it to become for him not only an intellectual fact, but a moral obligation of conscience as well.

◆ Present commitment

The question facing us today is to recognise the paths along which this spirituality which we share is leading us. If opening schools by the first communities of Brothers can be seen as putting into practice the special concern for the poor, we must find an up-to-date means of putting our commitment to the service of the poor through education into practice.

This is when the idea of human rights and especially rights of children becomes visible. With the onset of the industrial society, the idea of right appeared little by little and asserted itself. The declaration of human and civil rights in 1789 followed by the drawing up of Laws as well as the declaration of

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great Public Freedoms at the end of the XIXth century are so many stages which marked the movement of codification of rights and duties in France. The peak of this movement was reached in 1948, with the creation of the UNO and the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first list of human rights with universal appeal. This Declaration includes in particular, an article 28, which states that all people have a right to social and international order so that the present rights and freedoms can be applied.

The contents of the commitment would gradually become precise: civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights, collective rights. From the universal the commitment would be extended to the regional level. It would take on more precise forms, better adapted to the regional political cultures. Then, certain subjects would change to more specialised commitments: fight against discrimination, fight against torture, etc. Lastly, certain classes of people would gradually benefit from a special protection, regarding their situation as potential victims: workers, victims of armed conflict, women, and what concerns us, children.

In 1989, the United Nations proclaimed a Convention for the rights of the child. This was greeted at the time as a major advance in human rights. This text is the culmination of long preparatory work, in which the BICE (Bureau International Catholique de l'Enfance) played an important part (cf. infra). It bears witness to the evolution of the image of the child in society. In fact, "if the child as a weak human being to be protected as bequeathed to us by the XIXth century is very present there, the Convention shapes a completely different image of the child, that of the future citizen, placed at the heart of a system of rights and responsibilities, of practical citizens who foreshadow their adult life".

The Convention had been preceded by a first Declaration with five points (1924) entitled "Declaration of Geneva", then by a second Declaration with ten points in 1959, in which the wording of a scarcely juridical right appeared, but which is very close to Lasallian spirituality touched on above: the right to love. We can now pause a while to call to mind the general dynamic of this Convention which allowed the international right of the child to pass from a declaratory statute to a binding one.

The Convention on the rights of the child contains 54 articles and it is intended to promote a truly legal statute of the child, itself promoted to the level of subject of rights. The Convention affirms the basic principles, among them being the **right of the child to a family**, or the necessary taking into account of **the higher interest of the child**. We will come back later to these two principles around which we can develop our proposals for new work. Beyond these principles the Convention contains measures which bring a change of perspective. The need for protection is no longer at the heart of the plan, even though a certain number of rights in social, cultural, economic and

penal matters refer to it. The most salient innovations concern the measures relating to fundamental freedoms: the child is recognised as having rights of opinion, expression, thought and association.

The text, it is agreed, breaks new ground by foreseeing a system of control of application. Article 43 of the Convention sets up a Committee of the rights of the child, charged with examining the reports of States with regard to the measures of application taken in the law of the country. These reports are examined and discussed by a group of ten independent experts. The NGOs, with a consultative statute under the United Nations, have the responsibility of producing alternative reports, which “complete” (not to say contradict) state reports which are often too flattering. This is the case with BICE for example. Taking into account the importance given to participation of the NGOs at the heart of the Committee of the Rights of the child in Geneva, the question of a specific presence of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, who represent almost a million young people in the world, becomes very pertinent.

◆ **lasallian intention**

The General Chapters of 1966 and 1976 asked the Brothers to work for the promotion of Justice and Peace (Rule, §7, §14 which invites the Brothers to strive resolutely through education for the promotion of justice and human dignity). This concern also drives the activity of the Brothers when it addresses a more comfortable social class. These two Chapters also made the Brothers more aware of the situations of injustice in which the poor are often victims. So it is in §40 that we read that “the Brothers prepare their pupils for creating more just relationships and help them to commit themselves effectively to action for justice and peace”.

From the time of its last General Chapter, in 2000, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools has made the question of the rights of the child a central plank for work and reflection. It is a priority and has been put to all the districts. A document entitled “Associated to answer the challenges of the 21st century” takes up these avenues of work and suggests directions. In the paragraph entitled “Matters of educational urgency”, can be found a certain number of proposals referring to the rights of the child:

1. The Brothers and their Partners need to be more aware of the contents of the UNO Convention on the rights of the child of 1989;
2. Putting them into practice should be adapted to local conditions;
3. The lasallian educational mission should be directed towards the children whose rights are not protected;
4. The answer of the Brothers and their Partners to the demands of the Convention should be made with an evangelical perspective.

To give these directions a specific content, the document suggests that “the rights of the child should be considered as an urgent aspect of the lasallian

educational mission for the next seven years; that each District, sub-District, Delegation should include this theme in its plan of action for which at least one Brother or partner would be named who would help”

- to collaborate with local organisations who are working for the promotion of the rights of the child;
- to identify violations of the rights of the child in its immediate area;
- to alert the local authorities when the rights of the child are infringed;
- to be vigilant about the awareness and putting into practice of the rights of the child in its schools and Universities;
- to keep in touch with the Secretariat for the Educational Mission”.

The rights of the child represent an excellent way of raising the awareness of the members of our educational communities to the lasallian educational plan, and further, to our evangelical plan. What do the rights of the child represent and what do they speak of?

On reading the first part of this text, we become aware with greater or lesser definition potential situations of violation of the rights of the child such as lack of a civil state, separation from parents against their will, privation of family environment, trafficking in and selling of children, lack of freedom of expression, ill treatment, all kinds of exploitation including sexual abuse, slavery, torture, lack of medical care. So, the rights of the child, as they have been formalised by the Convention of the United Nations, represent the sum of the sufferings and lack of attention towards children, all forms of culture and levels of economic and social development. Beyond that, this Convention reveals the face of millions of children across the world who are suffering in a thousand and one ways, and always find themselves unable to act.

Every member of our educational communities (teaching and non-teaching staff, pupils and parents) should be brought back to the Lasallian Educational Project by this attention to the poor re-echoed in the demands of the promotion of the rights of the child. Experience has shown that in our establishments, many teachers (to mention only them) are unaware of this Lasallian Educational Project, and know very little of the life of the Founder and his spirituality. How can this lasallian spirituality and commitment to the educational service of the poor be lived in these conditions? The rights of the child represent a sufficiently open dialogue to allow it to be heard by the greatest number with excellent reception. By calling to mind humankind (the child) and its anguish, and by laying out the outlines of a more just world and more respectful of human dignity, by speaking of equality, protection, well-being, health, safety, inviolability of the human person, solidarity, co-operation, responsibility and whole development of the child, the rights of the child will point the road which links up with the Lasallian Educational Project. What common values there are between the rights of the child and lasallian spirituality! : What team work for announcing the Word! To make our educational communities more aware of the rights of the child comes back to

starting again on the path of values and sense, without in any way having to impose on the members of our communities an act of Christian faith. From this point of view, the campaign of raising awareness of the rights of the child could prove to be a real opportunity for a renewed explanation of the lasallian commitment to the service of the poorest.