

Blessed Nicholas Barre's Thoughts on Education

Nicholas Barre though not a teacher himself, was an educator who engaged in the formation of teachers. He recruited ladies who expressed an interest in reaching out to the young in France who were poor, uneducated and vulnerable to being misled and exploited. These ladies, later known as Charitable Mistresses, were prepared by him to become teachers.

1. Father Barre's philosophy of education sprang naturally from his deep contemplation of a loving God.
 - he saw each child, irrespective of background, as a unique person loved by God.
 - He believed that each child had the capacity if helped, to be released from a condition of ignorance and wretchedness.

2. His guiding principle to his teachers was:

"Our task is to serve, to mould and to cultivate those who are entrusted to us" MP

3. The distinguishing traits of a Charitable Mistress ie a teacher identified by him are:

- Firstly to be "disinterested" – meaning to offer the free gift of oneself irrespective of the outcome.
- Secondly to consider oneself as a servant whose primary concern is for the growth and welfare of the children in their care.

4. His vision of education embraced the following characteristics:

- **Receptivity** A welcoming disposition
- **Acceptance** of all persons without prejudice or distinction.
- "Have no preference as to the talents or dispositions – good or bad – with regard to those you teach"
- **Freedom** with regard to people and pressure of all sorts
- **Openness** to the universal without sectarianism with regard to race or religion: ***"We can accept Huguenot girls provided that they do not bring in any books that do not conform and that they be subject to the rules of the school as the others are" (MRE)***
- **Time** is to be given to the children and their parents:

"A Mistress must urge the mothers to take the trouble to come and see her once every three months to discuss their children's education" (MRE)

- **Professional Integrity**, rigour and regularity:

"Take care to use the time given for its designated purpose. " Should they (the Mistresses) reduce their time at school, their guilty consciences will let them know it"

Advice on the desirable ethos of Schools

Blessed Nicholas Barre drew up pedagogical guidelines for the running of his schools. These guidelines, whether for the drawing up of timetables, the best approach to teaching religious knowledge and other subjects, all emphasise the importance of treating each child with respect, recognising that “even the least is in the image of God.” He insisted that:

- Teachers/mentors must try to make themselves understood
- To achieve this, “teachers speak little when giving lessons, using sign language where appropriate” AM
- “All pretentiousness must be avoided...the same questions must be asked again and again in order to get the children to respond” AM

With regard to reading: “The Mistresses will not continually ask those who follow easily to read, but those who seem less attentive”

To the smaller girls: “The Mistresses will show a large sheet of paper with the letters imprinted in large characters.” (RJ)

Nicholas Barre especially recommended that the Mistresses: “Discern the minds of the children in order to raise their consciences, each one according to his or her genius.” (MP 21) because “One does not look for cherries on a plum tree. The care and knowledge of an educator consists in perceiving this fruit and guiding it to perfect maturity.” (MD 41)

Often, repeated words concerning the Mistresses are **gentleness and patience**: “You must conquer souls through gentleness...you will attract more people in this sensitive way than with harsher precepts.” (M 20) and “If a school child makes a mistake, you will correct him with gentleness...” (AM) “A Mistress will succeed in her work insofar as she makes herself esteemed and loved; to this end, she will be vigilant so as to master her passions in such a way that she never shows her anger.” (AM)

Nicholas Barre listened to God

The seventeenth century was marked by the spirituality of the “Ecole Francaise” which can be expressed thus:

“The source and centre of Christian Life is the Mystery of God made Man: the Incarnation of the Son of God, JESUS.”

It’s not surprising then that Father Barre was himself profoundly marked by this! He contemplated long and hard this mysterious reality:

“The Word was made Flesh and He dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14)

He was deeply influenced and advises in his many maxims:

“Never stray far from the crib of Jesus. Therefore, modesty in everything.” (MF 11)

“When God spoke to His people, it was through His prophets and since the Incarnation through His Son. It is He therefore whom we must follow and listen to” (MTP 166)

In his writings, the result of this contemplation of the Incarnate God is clearly visible in how it influenced the way he regarded children:

“Even though God be of supreme greatness, He nevertheless took pleasure in humbling Himself for the poor and the lowly. That is why He predestined that His Son become not only a man, but a little child... He placed a child in the midst of the apostles. He prevented them from stopping the approach of the children. He declared to all men that if they did not become as “little” children, they would not be saved. He said that whoever receives a little child in His name, receives Him and elsewhere He says that whatsoever we do for the least of these little ones, the poor, the wretched, we do to Him, so it follows that “whoever receives a poor or abandoned child receives Jesus Christ.” (Statutes & Rules Art. 2)

Nicholas Barre listened to the men of his era

The “Great Century” was not a happy one for all men. Only those considered “noble” enjoyed a good standard of life. The insecurity of the streets and alleys in the towns in that period could be found in any number of today’s suburbs.

Ordinary folks were reduced to a miserable state. There were fewer men and more women who needed to learn to sign their name and to read! With his nomination to Rouen in 1659, Nicholas Barre discovered the distress of the children left to themselves, the distress of young people exploited, despised, often hungry, the distress of young women incapable of managing a home!

Nicholas Barre was particularly affected, and felt deep down in his heart of an apostle totally dedicated to the service of the Lord, the tragic absence of God in the poor eaten away by misery and despair.

He was haunted by thoughts of these young people in such decline.

He also noted the number of workhouses, the workers unable to fight their lethargy and the children forced to beg.

He began to conceive a project, helped by the circumstances at the time. In 1662 during one of the Parish missions while Father Barre was preaching in the Church at Sotteville, two young women – Françoise Duval and Marguerite Lestocq – offered their help. They assembled some young girls in order to teach them to “read”. Did this consist of a school, lessons in reading, a sort of Youth Club or Catechism classes? It’s difficult to say.

What we can confirm is that Françoise Duval and Marguerite Lestocq shared Nicolas Barre’s convictions : “It’s not enough to teach Human Sciences, the most important thing is to inspire the love of the Lord and to give a truly Christian education” (MP 17)

“And as little children are sensitive to celestial truths, it is important to teach them all you can very early on.” (MP18)

With François and Marguerite, the Institute of “Charitable Mistresses” was born and became “The Institute of the Sisters of the Infant Jesus” in Rouen, then in Paris.

Twenty years later, M. Lestocq wrote an account of the early years of their work. The simplicity and enthusiasm of her testimony bears witness to its authenticity.