

THE EDUCATIONAL INSPIRATION OF THE CONGREGATION  
OF OUR LADY

# OUR PERSONAL TOUCH



The personal touch?  
It's that way of kneading the dough which, when a few pinches of yeast are added, gives each loaf its unique taste.

**T**here is no difference between what is taught in a school run by the Congregation of Our Lady and a state school; and the approach is similar to what happens in other Catholic schools. Defining what is special to us doesn't mean comparing ourselves to others according to teaching, learning and pastoral practice but going back to our source: Pierre Fourier and Alix Le Clerc, who created "a personal touch."

*Working in a school under the Guardianship of the Congregation of Our Lady, means first **entering a story**;  
it also means **living by an inspiration**;  
and finally, it is **building a community around an educational project to fulfil the vocation of every human being.***

## 1. Entering a story

**T**ierre Fourier (1565-1640), co-founder with Alix Le Clerc (1576-1622) of the Congregation of Our Lady, was born at Mirecourt (in what is today the département or county of the Vosges), in the Duchy of Lorraine, which was then an independent state.

He was both a brilliant and a thorough student at school and then at the University of Pont-à-Mousson, which had been recently founded by the Jesuits. He had a humanist, theological education which imbued him with a profound spiritual life and an optimistic view of mankind.

In 1585, he joins the Canons Regular of Saint Augustine, choosing a form of religious life that enables him to undertake wide-ranging apostolic and pastoral work.

In 1597, he becomes priest of Mattaincourt, a large village in the Vosges.

The time when his work will gather pace is a time of profound social, intellectual, political and religious changes, a period that is a



ferment of new ideas.

Social inequality is deep-rooted, an inequality based on birth even more than on wealth. Power is wholly patriarchal, in family life as in the state: women, likened to children who need to be looked after, have no place in society; they are viewed with mistrust by the Church, which considers them as weak and dangerous beings, born to be a source of temptation.

This society is steeped in faith, and religion exerts a considerable influence over social life and behaviour but, alongside this, powerful superstition permeates all social classes.

Finally, it's a society marked by violence, in the way feelings are expressed and in the brutality of accepted behaviour: human life is worth very little and many people are destitute. The Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), which is raging at the time, will only intensify the violence and make the life of the poor even more unbearable.

In 1597, Pierre Fourier becomes priest of Mattaincourt, a large village in the Vosges...



First school opened at Poussay in 1598

When Pierre Fourier becomes priest of Mattaincourt, the Church is only just starting to implement the reforms decided by the Council of Trent, after a long period of decadence: there are still very many abuses, while clergy and lay people remain ignorant.

Pierre Fourier can see clearly the failings of society and the Church of his time and he is unable to accept them. He will devote himself, to the best of his abilities, to fighting social abuses and injustices, while at the same time restoring true Christian life, in his parish and wherever his influence will spread. In his eyes, pastoral renewal goes hand in hand with improving social conditions.

*schools open to all that will pursue both a Christian education and personal development*

In this context, one issue concerns him above all, the teaching and education of children, especially girls from humble backgrounds, who are completely ignored at that time. He is convinced that, a Christian education and the teaching of girls, while helping them "to live and to live well,"<sup>1</sup> can

and must lead to a real transformation of family life and society as a whole. In 1597, a young

parishioner of Mattaincourt, Alix Le Clerc, comes to find Pierre Fourier to confide in him her desire to give herself to God and to "start a new congregation of nuns, for doing all possible good."<sup>2</sup> Out of Pierre's quest for social renewal and Alix's intuition will come,

in 1597, the Congregation of Our Lady, dedicated to the teaching and education of girls in schools open to all that will pursue both a Christian education and personal development. So, by responding to a pressing need of the time, the education of girls, the Congregation will work to advance the cause of women in order to change society. In 1598 the first school is founded in Lorraine. It will

<sup>1</sup>Pierre FOURIER, *Constitutions de 1640*, 3<sup>e</sup> partie, *De l'Instruction des filles séculières*, (en abrégé ici *Ifs*), Préambule, 1. (Pierre Fourier *Constitutions of 1640*, 3<sup>rd</sup> part. *On the Instruction of Lay Girls* (abbreviated here to *Ilg*), Foreword, 1.)

<sup>2</sup>Alix LE CLERC, *Relation autobiographique*, 15. (Alix Le Clerc, *Account of My Life*, 15)

<sup>3</sup>Pierre FOURIER, *ibidem*.

be followed by many others in France and in Europe and, later, in other continents.

## 2. Living by an inspiration

**A** founder is not so much a model to be imitated, as a source on which to draw in order to live, “*and to live well*” today.

Living by his inspiration, doesn't mean wondering what he would do in our place, but understanding what inspired him and giving form today to that “soul”. So, we add our own account to a story started more than 400 years ago.

What is the educational vision of Pierre Fourier?

Educating – making someone grow – means fulfilling the vocation of a human being.

It starts by children learning a certain language, a way of writing, a culture, until this culture becomes a capacity and, gradually a career choice as much as personal development, which will allow them to speak a message – their message – which is both unique and for others.

*“The little schoolgirls, although young, are not however a small or worthless part of the Church of God. They already have some capacity, and in a few years' time, they will really be able to do great good. On this subject it is very useful, even essential, for their own good and that of their parents and the families that they will guide in the future, and of the nation, that they should be trained from an early age, and carefully instructed in the fear of God, and as well, if possible, in some other things that will help them to live and to live well.”<sup>3</sup>*

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## ... he will devote himself to fighting social abuses and injustices

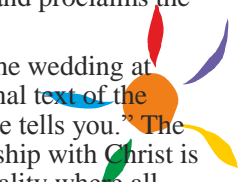
It comes through revelation: God entrusts us with the world so that we become co-creators with Him of his human face. A revelation that is in fact a promise: “You will love.”

Pierre Fourier founded the Congregation of Our Lady on a “spirituality”: the Incarnation. It inspired the rule of life of the sisters that could be summed up in this injunction: “*Follow Christ engaging openly with this world*”<sup>4</sup>, that is, as Paule Sagot comments, “living with the men and women of his time, of his country, when he travelled with his apostles along the roads of Palestine. Following him wherever he goes, means walking with him along the road, not knowing who you might meet or what may happen.”<sup>5</sup>

“The spirituality of the road” that invites you to follow him in his public ministry and proclaims the apostolic vocation of the Congregation of our Lady.

It is significant that Pierre Fourier embeds this spirituality in the Gospel passage of the wedding at Cana (Jn 2, 1–11): the first act of Christ’s public ministry in Saint John, and a seminal text of the Congregation of Our Lady in these words of Mary to the servants: “Do whatever he tells you.” The Congregation started with a wedding, a feast with wine! Because companionship with Christ is a wedding. . . until the parable of the Wedding Feast of the Kingdom becomes a reality where all men will be gathered around the Lord who will wait on them (Lk 12, 37), because no more will they refuse to love. Education looks forward to this.

“Don’t look at people as they should be but as they are or can be.”<sup>6</sup> This viewpoint is rooted in the word of God and in knowing Him closely. It’s because this message has reached, shaped and inspired generations of sisters of Our Lady in their daily lives that they have come to discover and examine all those that they met, young and old “both poor and rich.” Today, this educational inspiration is not the exclusive preserve of the sisters. Each teacher is invited to draw on the source of Pierre Fourier and Alix Le Clerc to rediscover their own responsibility.



### 3. Building a community

#### a – Being a teacher by building a community

Education must use the means which match its interactive nature: the teacher learns at the same time as the pupil. This presupposes the building of a community, as a principle, so that they grow together.

It is significant that Pierre Fourier brought together the “schoolmistresses” as a religious community: he wanted to entrust the education of a large number of young schoolgirls “*to other girls who lead a good life, sufficient in number and capacity that they do the job well and for them to live together and have no other business which might distract or hinder them.*”<sup>7</sup>

This is how Alix Le Clerc found four companions - Gante André, Isabeau de Louvroir, Claude Chauvenel, Jeanne de Louvroir – to start the Congregation and open the first school.



*“Follow Christ engaging openly with this world” Pierre Fourier*

<sup>4</sup> *Constitutions de 1640*, 2<sup>e</sup> partie, VI, 4. (*Constitutions of 1640*, 2<sup>nd</sup> part, VI, 4)

<sup>5</sup> Paule SAGOT, *Pierre Fourier, Alix Le Clerc, Spiritualité*, Publication CND, 1998. (Paule Sagot, *Pierre Fourier, Alix Le Clerc, Spirituality*, CND Publication, 1998.)

# Don't look at people as they should be ...



The community enables us to take on a sustained educational mission; it is also the place where we can communicate, exercise judgment and give encouragement; lastly it ensures the success of the educational project together with the person who has the ultimate responsibility.<sup>8</sup>

The main aim of the Headteacher is to “*preserve and increase the zeal for teaching*”<sup>9</sup> and to ensure that teachers are “*living examples on whom their young disciples can model themselves at any time . . . so that later they remember this and use it throughout their lives.*”<sup>10</sup>

It is the Headteacher's responsibility to choose them in accordance with the common project and the relationships that it creates: “*They will always show each other all honour and respect, each taking care to say or do nothing<sup>11</sup> that might sadden their companion or cause her to think less of her*”; to instruct them so that “*they seek the profit and advancement of their pupils*” and that “*watching her teacher at work the child acquires the knowledge that she shows her.*”

Let there be pleasure  
in learning  
Let there be meaning  
in what is learned  
Let rhythms be  
respected  
Let learning be  
personalised

The community can and must ensure that the necessary training is provided, such as sharing good practice, meetings and courses.

“*They will often talk in meetings about the best ways to help pupils progress . . . They can discuss what they believe might contribute more to the education of the children.*”<sup>12</sup>

The core of the method is to evolve: “*The mistresses will use it [the method prescribed by Fourier] temporarily until they find another that is clearly more appropriate and more useful and has the full approval of all their religious houses.*”<sup>13</sup>

Today the educational community is wider than the religious community of the Congregation: each teacher is in fact part of the Congregation's mission.

## b - Creating a community that educates

Centred on the needs of the children, the educational project targets their development, or, in the language of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, their “construction”: it is not just about passing on knowledge but building a personality. That comes through:



In the educational relationship, the adult occupies the place of an older person which he or she cannot abandon: each life needs the support of others if it is to be built.

<sup>8</sup> In the time of Pierre Fourier, the superior of the religious community; today, the headteacher responsible for the school community.

<sup>9</sup> *Constitutions des sœurs de Reims*, 1673. (*Constitutions of the Sisters of Reims*, 1673).

<sup>10</sup> *Ifs*, XXII, 3. (*Ilg*, XXII, 3).

<sup>11</sup> *Ifs*, XVI, 30. (*Ilg*, XVI, 30). Here “companion” means a sister or colleague.

<sup>12</sup> *Constitutions de Sens*, 1<sup>ère</sup> partie, IV, 10, et 3<sup>e</sup> partie, XVIII, 4. (*Constitutions of Sens*, 1<sup>st</sup> part, IV, 10, and 3<sup>rd</sup> part, XVIII, 4).

<sup>13</sup> *Ifs*, VI, 1 (*Ilg*, VI, 1)



. . . . but as they are or can be.

## 2 – Welcoming the pupil:

*“When a girl comes to the school, whether she is on her own as she is already quite old or whether her mother or another relative accompanies her (which would be more appropriate and desirable), the Mother Bursar,<sup>14</sup> having obtained permission from the Mother Superior, will meet the girl in the parlour. Once she has seen her, listened to her and examined her, and once she has carefully checked that there is no impediment or other reason not to proceed, if she doesn’t know her, she will ask her name and that of her parents, where they live and where she does, if she doesn’t live with them.*

*She will ask her if she is prepared to study hard, to come to class every day at the appointed time, to maintain modest behaviour in all lessons and besides this to obey the school rules.*

*She will ask her also what she aspires and wishes to learn. She will write in a big register, designed for this purpose, the name of the girl, the name and surname of her father, her age, her place of residence and the day and the year when she started school.*

*She will inform her which class she is to join, she will notify the mistress and will send her to the next lesson.”<sup>15</sup>*

## 3 - Learning:

- Let there be pleasure in learning:

*“The girls in the third class, as well as those in the second, will each have two lessons in the morning and two in the afternoon, and they will repeat each of these lessons quietly several times, until they know them properly, if this can be done without it being tedious. The girls in the top class and the more advanced girls in the second will have spelling and number work with figures and counters every day.”<sup>16</sup>*

*It is important that not just the girls in the top and the second class learn to do handiwork but that the young ones in the third class start to try a few simple pieces that are straightforward, light and enjoyable for them.”<sup>17</sup>*

- Let there be meaning in what is learned:

*“The mistresses will take particular care that the girls understand what they are reading and that they follow and pick out the meaning by stopping at the commas and the full stops.”<sup>18</sup>*

- Let the rhythms of learning be respected:

*“So that everything runs in an orderly, beneficial and smooth way, schools will be divided into three classes. The top class will be made up of the girls who read registers, other documents and handwritten letters; in the second those who are learning to read printed books and have already made some progress; in the third those who are starting to know their letters, put syllables together and pronounce words.”<sup>19</sup>*

- Let learning be personalised:

*« “So that the children understand more easily, remember better and pay more attention to listening carefully, the mistress will repeat the same things to them several times in the same lesson. From time to time as she talks, she will turn now to one pupil now to another to ask them what she has just said.”<sup>20</sup>*



<sup>14</sup> The Mother Bursar is the head of the day school, the Mother Prefect the head of the boarding school.

<sup>15</sup> *Ifs*, III, 3. (*Ilg*, III, 3).

<sup>16</sup> Fourier prescribes the two ways of learning arithmetic at the time: sums that are written (numbers) or calculated with the help of «jets» (counters).

<sup>17</sup> *Ifs*, XXIII, 6. (*Ilg*, XXIII, 6).

<sup>18</sup> *Usages de Châlons, De l’Instruction*, 37. (*Usages of Châlons, On Instruction*, 37).

<sup>19</sup> *Ifs*, VI, 2 (*Ilg*, VI, 2).

<sup>20</sup> *Ifs*, VIII,4. (*Ilg*, VIII, 4).

<sup>21</sup> Paule SAGOT, *Essai de présentation de la spiritualité des fondateurs*, publication CND, 1996. (Paule Sagot, Introductory Essay on the Spirituality of the Founders, CND publication, 1996).

« Make Him grow »  
Alix Le Clerc



# It's not just about transmitting knowledge...



## 4– the environment:

- Let the buildings be welcoming and attractive:

Pierre Fourier said, “that poverty must shine out in the sisters’ house but in the library, the sacristy and the infirmary, nothing could be too magnificent.”<sup>22</sup>

- Let education aim to:

### 1. develop the individual:

*“Care will be taken that the girls’ hair is combed, that they are washed and properly dressed; in addition, we must ensure the cleanliness of their heads, clothes, food, rooms and everything that they use. This will be especially important for the older ones, in as much as they can do things for themselves, while the nuns will help the little ones.”<sup>22</sup>*

### 2. teach practical skills, useful for the future:

*“They will be taught, gently and thoughtfully, certain little things that will prove useful to them later, like sewing or mending their clothes, keeping them clean, arranging and tidying them. For those that wish, they will learn how to do some laundry jobs which are useful for girls to know, in the home or in a household.”<sup>23</sup>*

They will be taught gently and thoughtfully certain little things that will prove useful to them later

## 5– the way to live:

- Let the “schoolgirls” feel loved, understood and:

*If they are sometimes upset or anxious, we will try to support and console them, look after them both then and at other times so that they feel that they can turn to their mistresses in confidence and without fear as often as they need to.”<sup>24</sup>*

- Let the “mistresses” be gentle, patient and respectful:

*“They will show no sign of anger, impatience or scorn. They will not be aggrieved or get angry with those who are slow to learn. They will not call them asses, fools, bad girls nor will they shout at them.”<sup>25</sup>*

- Is there a conflict? The “mistresses” are encouraged to listen, to talk and more besides . . . Let’s look at an example. “At Pont-à-Mousson, in June 1611, unrest was rife in the boarding wing. Fourier, worried by this, questioned a boarder called Marie who, in special circumstances, had come out of the boarding wing to look after her sick uncle in Mattaincourt. Initially the child was reluctant to say anything but, persuaded by the priest’s goodness, she agreed to tell him everything. She identified six or eight ringleaders who were ready to leave the school on Saint John’s day in summer, because, according to them, life was no longer bearable and they had many grievances: they were treated too harshly; two of them had been beaten; Mother Alix was always scolding Sister Marie for supporting them; “their good teachers who treated them kindly have left,” “there are too many new things” and, the clinching argument “they no longer get anything with their bread at teatime.” Attentive to the complaints of the rebels, Fourier relayed them to the sisters. On 12 June he wrote to them that perhaps “you hear nothing of these little murmurings which are circulating without your knowledge. You must discuss amicably among yourselves to see whether there isn’t anything that should be looked at more closely, so that order is restored.”



<sup>22</sup> *I*fs, XXII, 23. (*I*lg, XXII, 23).

<sup>23</sup> *I*fs, XXIII, 2. (*I*lg, XXIII, 2).

<sup>24</sup> *I*fs, XXII, 4. (*I*lg, XXII, 4).

<sup>25</sup> *I*fs, XVI, 11. (*I*lg, XVI, 11).

<sup>26</sup> Récit dans Marie-Claire TISON, *Un maître en éducation, saint Pierre Fourier*, éd. Don Bosco, 2002.

(Story told in Marie-Claire Tihon, *A Master in Education, Saint Pierre Fourier*, ed. Don Bosco, 2002).



## ... but also building a personality

And here is his diagnosis: “To solve this problem I think that you should try to calm or mollify the two older girls who were beaten recently for I know not what little offences. You should make it appear to them and to their companions, by words and deeds, that you will treat them more kindly from now on, that you will give them a few, inexpensive cherries every day or some little titbits for their tea so that, in every way, you will strive to see them happy and content.”<sup>26</sup>

- Let the values be transmitted, while respecting the freedom of the individual:

*“The mistresses will use every possible opportunity to train their pupils in all their devotions<sup>27</sup>, now one now another, according to the time, place and individual: but always without forcing them, without pushing them too hard or bothering them or making their life too uncomfortable. As these young learners start to get to work, their teachers will instruct them and will support them where possible, to lead them by the hand, to guide them to take the best course of action, to encourage them and also to put them gently back on the right path, if by chance they stumble, out of ignorance or some other cause, until they have mastered everything.”<sup>28</sup>*

## 4. Fulfilling the vocation of every human being

### 1 – Human vocation:

“Make him grow”: for more than 400 years, every sister of Our Lady can recognise herself in this familiar translation of a vision of Alix Le Clerc:

*“Our Lady showed herself to me, holding her little Son, and gave him to me, telling me to feed him until he was grown. This meant that I should seek his glory.”<sup>29</sup>*

“The Glory of God is the living man” said Saint Irenaeus. So, we must help children to grow, to fulfil their vocation as man or woman in their full human and spiritual dimension.

For every human being has a particular vocation: a call to build themselves from the treasure which is within them, made up of their talents. There is inside us more than ourselves, even if we don’t yet know it, even if we don’t dare to believe it: “There is absolutely no kind of human beings who need to despair of their vocation,” argues Saint Augustine.

*“What should we teach our children? That the rich (albeit with difficulty), the poor, the labourers, the lawyers, everyone according to their condition can become a saint, by closely following their rules of life in the vocation where God has called them.”<sup>31</sup>*

Hence this advice: “The nuns will endeavour to show their young charges everything which can be learned and practised by girls in the world: to train themselves in the holy love of God, and in the sincere love of their neighbour

*and to conduct themselves in a holy way amid the wealth and splendour of the world, in poverty, scorn and need and to take care to provide, as far as possible, for what concerns the life of this world (...) and the happiness of eternal life.”<sup>32</sup>*

“Provide for what concerns the life of this world”: a vast programme that means self-discovery and development and, for the teachers, adapting to each young person and their life circumstances.



<sup>27</sup>Devotion means practising the love of God and one’s neighbour.

<sup>28</sup>Ijs, IX, 20. (Ilg, IX, 20).

<sup>29</sup>Alix LE CLERC, *Relation autobiographique*, 23. (Alix Le Clerc, *Account of My Life*, 23)

<sup>30</sup>*Sermons*, 304. (Sermons, 304)

<sup>31</sup>Pierre Fourier, *Lettre à un chanoine*, 1627. (Pierre Fourier, *Letter to a Canon*, 1627)

<sup>32</sup>Ijs, V, 1. (Ilg, V, 1).





## 2 - Christian vocation:

Because Pierre Fourier conceives of education only with a Christian vision, training for a life of faith and for evangelical behaviour has a key place in his educational project.

- How can we be a “practical” Christian without hearing the Word of God ring out for all on Christ’s baptismal day: “This is my beloved son.”?

Hearing in our turn this boy or girl’s name that God gives us and that he wants to reveal to us again. Learning to know the person of Christ, “all his actions and all his words when he was engaging openly with this world,” following the spirituality of the sisters of Our Lady. Feeding this relationship in us through mediation and the contemplation of Christ’s actions.

- How can we be a “practical” Christian without being taught the prayer which makes us call God “Father”? Saint Augustine is quick to identify this with desire: “Your desire itself is your prayer, and if your desire is constant, so will be your prayer... If you never want to stop praying, never stop desiring. Is your desire constant? Then so must be your voice. You will only fall silent when you have ceased to love.”<sup>33</sup>

- How can we be a “practical” Christian if we don’t become a disciple – following him – and an apostle – sent by him – to build the Church with others? Following in his footsteps and taking others by the hand to share the Good News.

They will be trained “in the love of their neighbour.”<sup>34</sup> Saint Augustine makes it clear: “Spread your love over all the world if you want to love Christ because the members of Christ are spread over all the world.”

*“They will take care above all not to offend or scorn any of their companions, however young or poor they may be. They will love them all in God and honour them and will all live in peace without doing or saying anything that might distress or sadden any one of them, an attitude that they will show to all others too.”<sup>36</sup>*

## 3 - Christian community:

In the spirit of Pierre Fourier, the proclamation of faith is an integral part of a visible, accessible Christian community: faith is not just in books and talks but in the people who live it. It needs the same educational approach: teaching, attention, respect. *“We will teach them gently, gradually, according to circumstances and their ability, to keep themselves always ready and willing to do in the service of God everything that he will ask of them.”<sup>37</sup>*

*“If a girl of that so-called religion<sup>38</sup> happens to be there with the others, treat her gently and charitably, don’t let the others bother her or rail at her or get angry. Don’t ask her to leave her wrongful course and don’t criticise her religion directly.”<sup>39</sup>*

The “educational bread” of the Congregation of Our Lady has been shared among generations of young people and adults. Everyone is invited to feed on it still “to grow together.”



**Pierre-Fourier Alix-Le-Clerc  
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**Congregation of Our Lady**



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<sup>33</sup> *Commentaire du psaume, 367*  
(Expositions on the Psalms, 367)

<sup>34</sup> *Ijs, V, 1. (Ilg, V, 1).*

<sup>35</sup> *Commentaire sur la 1<sup>ère</sup> épître de Jean*  
(Commentary on the First Epistle of  
John)

<sup>36</sup> *Ijs, XVII, 12. (Ilg, XVII, 12).*

<sup>37</sup> *Ijs, IX, 7. (Ilg, IX, 7).*

<sup>38</sup> So-called reformed religion  
(Protestant)

<sup>39</sup> FOURIER, *Lettre aux sœurs de Metz,*

26 février 1624. (Fourier, *Letter to the Sisters at Metz*, 26 February 1624).