

# 1. APOSTLE

## Summary:

1. The apostles in the New Testament were chosen to be witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They were sent to bring to the whole world the message of salvation in Christ. – 2. In his writings, De La Salle refers frequently to the New Testament apostles as the reference point for the traditional content of the Christian faith and as models for the zeal of the Brothers. – 3. De La Salle envisions the vocation of the Brother as succeeding in some way to the ministry of the apostles, especially in the catechizing of the poor. 4. Consequently, Lasallian spirituality is an apostolic spirituality, integrating the elements of faith and zeal.

## 1. THE MEANING OF THE WORD

1.1. The word is used almost exclusively in the meaning attached to it in the New Testament scriptures. As derived from the Greek, *apostellein*, the root meaning of the word refers to someone who is sent or charged with a special mission. In the New Testament the Apostles are chosen by Jesus to carry on his mission to announce the good news of the kingdom of God. A distinction is made between the disciples, who were relatively many, e.g. the 72 as in Mt 17, Mk 9 and Lk 10, and the Apostles who are often identified with “The Twelve” especially chosen by Jesus and listed by name. Peter, James, and John are given special prominence in the gospel accounts, while Peter is singled out for a special leadership role. After the betrayal by Judas, Matthias was elected to succeed to his place among the Twelve. Once the mission to the Gentiles was undertaken, Paul and Barnabas came to be considered Apostles, although never numbered among the Twelve.

1.2. There were some interesting distortions in the definition of an apostle current in 17th century France. The Richelet dictionary of the period, although noting that the word comes from Greek, ignores the Greek root as well as the New Testa-

ment distinction when it defines an apostle vaguely as “someone who was a disciple of Jesus Christ”. The role of the Apostles is said to be “to serve as a model for those who have embraced the ecclesiastical state”. The dictionary also notes that the term apostle had some currency as applied to comical persons, practical jokers, and libertines. It goes without saying that these dictionary entries neither do justice to the vocation and function of the New Testament Apostles, nor are they reflected in the thought or writings of De La Salle.

## 2. THE APOSTLES IN THE WRITINGS OF DE LA SALLE

2.1. De La Salle refers extensively to the Apostles in his catechetical writings intended for the schools and in his meditations intended for the Brothers. De La Salle’s extensive reference to the Apostles derives from the New Testament and the traditional commentaries and theological writings current in his day. He explains that Jesus Christ began his mission by choosing twelve of his disciples to be Apostles (Da 31 B; see also, e.g. Db 235 A, 276 A), almost all of whom were of lowly birth (Da 34 B). After the Ascension, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit who descended on the Apostles at

Pentecost (Da 61 A, Db 51. Dc 178-179) to empower them to speak in tongues, to work miracles, and to fortify their faith (Db 52). The Apostles thus became the foundation of the Church (Db 54 C, 63 D), which has continued to exist ever since (Da 63 B, 74 D). The Apostles preached what they learned from Jesus (Da 8 B). Before separating they composed the Apostles' Creed (Da 13 D, Dc 233 D), which contains the principal points of our faith handed down from the Apostles through tradition (Da 13 C). The Pope and Bishops are successors of the Apostles (Da 70 A, D; Db 54 C, 63 D, 234 D; MF 176.2; MR 199.3).

2.1.1. For De La Salle, the Church is apostolic because it is the Apostles who have announced to the Church all the truths which Jesus had taught to them and which the Church has preserved to this day (Da 67 B). This doctrine was handed over, either in writing or orally, to the pastors who succeeded the Apostles (Da 8 B, 71 A). Despite the lack of New Testament evidence, De La Salle attributes to the Apostles the institution of such practices as the forty-day lenten fast (84 B), the use of holy water (Dc 30 D), the daily reception of Communion (I 239 A), and the building and consecration of churches (MF 188.1).

2.2. De La Salle faces the problem of identifying the Apostles as "The Twelve" chosen by Christ during his mission. This conflicts with the fact that Paul and Barnabas are called Apostles in the New Testament, even though they were not witnesses to the public ministry of Jesus and not named among the Twelve. De La Salle gives a rather arbitrary explanation, saying that Jesus Christ declared to Paul himself and to the other Apostles that he had chosen Paul to be the apostle of the Gentiles (Dc 230). Barnabas deserved to be called an apostle, De La Salle explains, because he was chosen by Saint Paul for apostolic functions and he worked closely with the Apostles to establish the Church (Dc 270 B).

2.3. De La Salle accepts the legend that the Apostles, after evangelizing the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea, met together to apportion the various countries to be evangelized and then dispersed throughout the whole world (Dc 231 C). For

example, Matthew went to Ethiopia (MF 158 A) and Bartholomew to the Indies (MF 159.2).

2.4. In his catechetical writings for the schools, De La Salle cites the individual Apostles by name, either to support some particular doctrine or practice of the Church, or to explain the origin and the meaning of the feast being celebrated. In his meditations composed for the Brothers, De La Salle proposes the individual Apostles as the source and model for particular practices of the spiritual life. Peter is proposed as a model of the spirit of faith (MF 139), John for his love for Jesus and devotion to Mary (MF 88), James for following Christ to Calvary (MF 145), Andrew for his zeal to make Christ known and his love of suffering (MF 78), Thomas for the quality of his faith after his infidelity (MF 84), Philip for his zeal for the salvation of souls (MF 119), James the Just for his love of prayer (MF 119), Matthew for his conversion and willingness to follow the call of Christ (MF 167), Bartholomew for carrying the Gospel with him and for his endurance of suffering (MF 159), Simon and Jude for their zeal and distaste for the world (MF 182), Matthias for reliance on the Holy Spirit (MF 107), Paul for his apostolic zeal, submission to direction, and devotion to duty (MF 99 and 140), Barnabas for his disinterestedness, his kindness and love for children (MF 134).

2.5. It must be admitted that De La Salle, no different from the other spiritual and theological authors of his time, was limited in his understanding of the function of the New Testament Apostles by an uncritical historical methodology leading to an unsophisticated and rather fundamentalist exegesis of the biblical texts. Thus, the 17th century authors were unaware of the fundamental difference between the missionary Apostles such as Paul or Barnabas and the "Twelve", whose non-missionary function was to be witnesses to Jesus and symbols of the new Israel. It is now realized that there is little New Testament evidence to show that most of the original Twelve ever exercised a specific and personal apostolic mission. Likewise there was prevalent up until Vatican II a very propositional understanding of divine revelation, both in Scripture and tradition. This led De La Salle and his contemporaries to envision Jesus

conveying to the Apostles the content of the Christian faith already formulated in much the same way as a contemporary preacher, teacher, or catechist. It was also presumed that formulas of faith, the Christian moral code, and the administration of the Sacraments, to say nothing of other more peripheral practices, were already in place in apostolic times.

2.6. For this reason, it is not surprising that the ecclesiology reflected in De La Salle's references to the Apostles is, on the surface, very traditional. (It should be remembered that ecclesiology did not emerge as a specialized field for theological instruction and investigation until well into the 20th century). For De La Salle the Church is the Roman Catholic Church, the faith of the Catholic Church is Apostolic and Roman (CE 111 C). It is a hierarchical Church, evident when he defines the power of jurisdiction as "that which the Pope and the Bishops have received and exercise as successors of the Apostles" (Da 70 A). We know from the biographers that De La Salle was a pillar of orthodoxy, consistently loyal to the Roman Pontiff in the face of the rampant Jansenism and Gallicanism of his time. He had little tolerance for heresy, especially Huguenot Calvinism. For that reason he was willing to waive some of his usual demands in order to send Brothers to Mende, Les Vans, and Alès in the South of France where that heresy had taken hold. It was not an ecumenical age.

From another point of view, however, De La Salle seems at times to have a broader view of the nature of the Church. He was convinced that God was calling him to establish a new kind of society in the Church to perform an apostolic function that the hierarchical structure of the time either could not or would not accomplish. This led him to enlarge his understanding of apostolic succession, as will be evident in the section that follows. De La Salle had no hesitation in considering that his Brothers, for example, who had no status either as clerics or religious in the Church, had been entrusted with the apostolic faith and an apostolic function to which the whole Church is the successor. It is only in the ecumenical discussions since Vatican II that a variety of ways of understanding

apostolic succession have become more prevalent in Catholic theology.

### 3. THE APOSTOLIC VOCATION OF THE BROTHER ACCORDING TO DE LA SALLE

3.1. One of the most striking elements in De La Salle's meditations for the feasts of the Apostles and those intended for the time of retreat is the boldness with which he links the vocation of the Brother to the ministry of the Apostles, in which, he says, they share as in some sense the successors of the Apostles. Whenever he has occasion to refer to the Apostles, the Founder takes the occasion to remind the Brothers that the work they do is apostolic (MF 128.1, 159.2, 167.2, 81.2).

3.1.1. On the feast of Saint Ignatius of Antioch the Founder reminds the Brothers that they perform one of the principal functions of the Apostles by bringing up in the faith and in religion their students who possess the Spirit of God by virtue of their baptism (MF 102.1). The feast of Saint Mark serves to recall the responsibility of the Brothers to teach the doctrine of the Apostles (MF 116.2). For the feast of Saint James the Great, De La Salle does not hesitate to say that the Brothers have been established by God to succeed to the holy Apostles in explaining the doctrine of Jesus Christ and strengthening the holy faith in the minds and hearts of those to whom they teach catechism, their principal function (MF 145.3). On the feast of Saint Andrew the Brothers are reminded that they have been called like the Apostles to make God known and for this great zeal is required (MF 78.2).

3.1.2. In the retreat meditations, De La Salle urges the Brothers to thank God for the grace God has given them in their work of sharing in the ministry of the holy Apostles and of the great bishops and pastors of the Church (MR 199.3). He tells them, "You are the successors of the Apostles in their task of catechizing and teaching the poor" (MR 200.1). After quoting the words of Jesus that the branch cannot bear fruit unless it remain attached to the vine, De La Salle tells the Brothers,

“What Jesus Christ says to his Apostles, he also says to you” (MR 195.3). De La Salle notes that the chief care of the Apostles, after teaching the first Christians, was to have them receive the sacraments, assemble for prayer together, and live according to the Christian spirit. Accordingly, he says to the Brothers, “Above everything else, this is what you are obliged to do in your ministry. In imitation of the Apostles you must give special care that those whom you teach receive the sacraments (MR 200.2).

#### **4. THE APOSTOLIC DIMENSION OF LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY**

4.1. After a tendency during the 19th and early 20th century to link the spirituality of the Institute of the Brothers to the medieval tradition and to abstract definitions of religious life, there has been a recovery since Vatican II of the originality of the spiritual vision of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. Fundamentally, his spirituality was not a monastic spirituality but an apostolic spirituality, integrating the external commission of preaching and teaching that Jesus gave to the Apostles with the internal dynamism and enabling power that comes from the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. It is true that Lasallian spirituality demands a certain distance from those aspects of the world opposed

to Christ; there is as well a strong contemplative element in sensitivity to the pervasive presence and providence of God cultivated in the practice of meditative prayer. Nevertheless, Lasallian spirituality does not terminate there but overflows into an “ardent zeal” for the saving of souls through the apostolic work of Christian education.

4.2. The historically conditioned and understandably outdated elements in the writings of De La Salle about the Apostles, should not deter the contemporary Lasallian from capturing the essence and permanently valuable use that De La Salle makes of the Apostles and the apostolic tradition. The Apostles are perfect models of the faith and zeal that De La Salle wanted to be the spirit of his Institute, and that is now extended to the entire Lasallian family to be shared. Faith for De La Salle as for the contemporary Lasallian is rooted in adherence to the Gospel message, the mystery of God’s good news of salvation even for those who “are thought to be far from it”. The zeal is the zeal of the Apostles, commissioned by Christ to go forth and to teach, an ardent zeal set on fire by the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. The apostolic faith and zeal of the Lasallian works for the building up of the Church, founded on the Apostles, as the living continuation of their apostolic mission in every age, in which the Lasallian educator shares in a limited but real apostolic succession.

#### **Complementary Themes:**

Catechism, Church, Ministry, Mission, Mystery, Salvation, Zeal.

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