

11. CONVERSATION

Summary:

1. The importance which the Founder gives to conversation. 1.1. Clarification of terms: the human and spiritual dimension of conversation. 1.2. The human dimension of conversation according to De La Salle. 1.3. The spiritual dimension of conversation according to De La Salle. – 2. De La Salle's concern to guide the Brothers with regard to conversation. 2.1. De La Salle as a born guide for the Brothers. 2.2. Characteristics of the speech of the Brother as envisaged by De La Salle. – 3. Conclusion.

1. THE IMPORTANCE WHICH DE LA SALLE GIVES TO CONVERSATION

1.1. Clarification of terms: the human and spiritual dimension of conversation

Taking the definition of “conversation” from a dictionary of the Founder’s time¹ we see that it is defined as “communcation between people” and as “a meeting with others”. It adds also that to converse is an “art” in that there are certain characteristics involved in speaking well and among the characteristics indicated are, for example, “making pleasant conversation”, “expressing what one is thinking”, choosing “respectable people” with whom to converse, “not to seek only the pleasure of dialogue” and not “to become malicious” in conversation. Conversation may also find other expressions as in the making and receiving of “visits” as well as through “relationships maintained through letter-writing”.

With regard to “spiritual conversation” another dictionary² defines it in terms of “dialogue” and “relationships” between people. It indicates differences from ordinary conversation with regard to objectives, nature and results which one hopes to achieve. The aim of “spiritual” con-

versation is to “orientate one’s life toward God, towards Christ” in the way indicated by St. Paul; “...whatever you do... do it all for the glory of God” (1Cor 10,31). It is also a “dialogue between people who share hopes, insights and their graces with the aim of encouraging each other in their spiritual and apostolic life. With regard to the nature of the conversation, the dictionary indicates that “one should not waste time”, that “one should accept the opportunity for conversation with enthusiasm” and “that it should provide spiritual nourishment for the person”. As to the fruits which should be drawn from spiritual dialogues, it indicates, among other things, that “they should serve as a preparation for prayer” and strengthen spiritual convictions.

1.2. The human dimension of conversation according to De La Salle

1.2.1. *The conversation of the Brothers among themselves.* Blain presents De La Salle as a model with regard to conversation; “...He so measured his words that nothing superficial, useless, frivolous or indiscreet was heard” (Blain 2,203). He knew how to excuse himself politely when Gabriel Drolin, in one of his letters, accused him of being severe in his attitude toward him (L 24,14). As

with all art, it has its rules which must be followed if one seeks perfection. De La Salle reminded his Brothers that they should not fall into any fault when speaking. Thus he indicated that “it is necessary to learn how to remain silent so as to speak better” (Blain 2,304). In the Common Rules (CL 25 p. 8, 1+) De La Salle detailed the specific aspects which had to be watched in conversation; among the stipulations given were “not to make fun of anybody”, “not to speak about oneself”, “to take care not to contradict”, “not to allow oneself to be carried away in frivolity” and “to take care not to become a nuisance or a burden for others”. In the Collection he indicates other aspects which the Brothers should note such as “not speaking too quickly, too loudly or too much” or “using pretentious speech” (R. 174,4).

In suggesting how the Brothers should thus conduct themselves with regard to their conversation, the Founder himself was to show the way by his example. Thus, in his “Rules which I have imposed on myself”, he prescribed that in visiting other people, which should be prompted only by “necessity”, he should “speak only when it was absolutely necessary” so that he would be disposed to ensure the maximum good from them. In his correspondence with Bro. Mathias, De La Salle drew attention to his use of expressions which were “not appropriate for him” as a religious (L 47,8) while, in writing to another Brother, he left all the Brothers a golden rule in the form of a synthesis for life; “...Among yourselves union must abound; with seculars - courtesy; with pupils - patience” (L 56,3).

1.2.2. *Conversation with seculars.* “It is through conversation that one moves into their world”. “Those who live in “the world” always have things in common; they are obliged to converse, to speak with each other”.³ He also touched on this theme of conversation in his book “Rules of Christian Courtesy and Politeness” (Cf. CL 19, Ch VI and VIII). These pages are dedicated to “conversation”, “visits” and “interviews” and he indicates the conditions which must be fulfilled if they are to be properly so-called. Thus, for example, he says that “they should be truthful” (p. 185) and that “one should be circumspect with words” while, among the negative aspects which should be

avoided” are “gossiping” of those who are absent (p. 207), or speaking “in a frivolous or thoughtless manner” (p. 208); rather they must always speak “with respect and in terms which demonstrate the deference they have for the people with whom they are speaking” (p. 208). He concludes by suggesting that if we find ourselves in the position of being unable “to speak well of our neighbour it is better to keep silent” (p. 195).

1.2.3. *Different attitudes in speaking.* Among the indications which the Founder gives for this in the same work are the following; “approbation or praising” (p. 211), “asking various questions”, “informing oneself and giving one’s opinion” (p. 215). With regard to the “compliments” which one is required to make to others through courtesy and politeness, he indicates that this should be done “with naturalness” (p. 227). The linking thread running through RB, as De La Salle indicates in the Preface, is “charity” — the sincere desire that relationships and dialogue between people should be real and not false and, consequently, the desire to avoid what Kempis speaks of when he says “...How many times have I been with people and returned less a man...” (L.I Ch. 20), a saying which De La Salle himself makes use of in the Collection (R 111,15).

1.3. The spiritual dimension of conversation

In this we move on to develop what was said in the definition at the beginning with regard to the aims, nature and results which one should find in the practice of spiritual conversation.

1.3.1. *Aim.* De La Salle asks the Brothers; “...In the talks that you have with your Brothers are you faithful to speak of God, and of what refers to Him, and of what might awaken his holy love in you? (MF 135,1). He appears to be indicating both a particular time and a particular way of speaking during the daily life of the Brother. With regard to **the time**, it is clear that he is speaking about the daily recreation which the Brothers make⁴ and which he sees as the time, par excellence, for spiritual conversation. Outside of this the Common Rules imposed restrictions on speaking both within and outside of the community. Thus, “...in

giving the Brothers recreation, De La Salle sought the means by which they would be sanctified" (Blain 2,137). Commenting on the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, he reminds the Brothers that Christ is revealed in the very heart of fraternal dialogue when it refers to the Kingdom (cf. MD 30,3). Thus, he says that "to the extent that you speak of Him and of what relates to Him you will learn to know Him and His holy maxims and to appreciate good".⁵ In this way the structures established by the Lasallian Rule, in view of their aim and relational significance, favoured a dynamic conception of regularity. Their nature was such that they encouraged the interior impulse which was expressed in "a passionate and courageous enthusiasm to do good" (AEP 319).⁶

With regard to the **manner** of speaking, De La Salle indicates that the Brothers should "...speak of God and of what refers to Him". In other words, they should "ensure that conversation "was holy and pleasing to God" (MD 30,1). Among the "holy things", or subjects, indicated by De La Salle as topics of conversation were "the lives of the saints" some of whom, exemplifying "the spirit of the Institute", were particularly singled out. But, in a special way, "the life of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary" (R 62,9; MF 183),⁷ along with the major themes of the Christian life as well as eternal truths (R 61-62), were proposed as topics. Similarly, themes which referred to the ministry of the Brother — zeal, self-giving, catechesis — as well as those relating to his state and which would help him in his consecrated life — spiritual reading, the theological virtue of faith, the supports of the Institute, virtues which one must acquire or defects to be avoided (R 63-70) along with "the efforts which are necessary to attain sanctity" (Blain 2,86) — were also proposed. Through the material he was thus proposing to the Brothers for conversation De La Salle was indicating to them, in a certain way, the spirit which he desired to reign among them and which should animate their whole life. They were, in short, "aspects that are essential".⁸

The Brothers were "to speak of what could awaken God's holy love in them". The Common Rules (CL 25 p. 30,9) puts it in a different way when it says that "...They will speak of edifying things which may move them to love God and to

the practice of virtue". If one is to speak of others "it will always be to speak well of them" (MD 30,2) or, as De La Salle indicated elsewhere, "...When a Brother speak of another he will show the respect and esteem which he has for him" (CL 25 p. 55,12). Thus, for example, when he gave information about the opening of the community in Marseilles, and indicated that Bro. Albert would be in it, he added that in "the first six months he would do marvels" (L 19,20). He gave great importance to spiritual conversation among the Brothers. It is in and through the community that the Brothers incarnate the values of the Gospel and where they grow in virtue. Consequently, he emphasises that "one of the things which those who have risen with Jesus Christ must do is to control their conversations, ensuring that they are holy and pleasing to God" (MD 30,1).

1.3.2. *The nature of spiritual conversation.* The spiritual conversation envisaged by De La Salle imposed certain demands which we will now outline. He says that "it should be different to that of seculars" — in other words, "the conversation of religious who have left the world must be totally different to that which those in the world are accustomed to" (MD 30,2). The behaviour of the Brother must "be edifying", in "everything and with everybody" (MF 92,2) and they must manifest this particularly in their conversation (MD 30,2). The Brothers are called "to a sanctity beyond the ordinary" (MD 39,2). When the Founder speaks of the "reflections which the Brothers must make on the means of becoming interior" (R 108,1) he speaks of "depriving themselves of worldly conversations" (R 111,1) and of "avoiding useless speech" (R 112,7) — in other words avoiding all that would make conversation worldly and prevent it from being spiritual. In this way he indicates the negative renunciations which the Brother must make as well as underlying the positive aspects which he wishes the Brother to aim for and to practice. In "depriving themselves of worldly conversations", De La Salle was restricting his observations to the area of relationships and indicating to the Brother that in this he should sacrifice all that is not conducive to the interior life. At the same time, he leaves wide open the whole field of conversation which would not

be characterized as “worldly”.

In his writings De La Salle speaks of “having worldly motives” (MD 45,3), of having “a worldly view of things” (L 24,13) and of allowing oneself to “be led by worldly inclinations” (MD 58,3). In the Rule (CL 25 p. 19,6) he says that the Brother should do nothing “through natural impulse, habit or any human motive”; on the contrary, as he says elsewhere, the Brother should “avoid everything which is not motivated and guided by the Holy Spirit since he must seek in everything “the glory of God” (CL 25 p. 140). He then moves on to indicate the reasons for this renunciation; “...because it drains the soul of God and of every good sentiment” (R 111,20) and because, as religious, their conversation “should correspond to that of citizens of heaven” (R 112,5; 1Pt 4,11; Phil 3,20).

It was logical that De La Salle should speak to the Brothers about the necessity of “emptying themselves” of some things in order that they could be “filled” with others because “the more that the heart is emptied” of worldly considerations the more “God will fill it with his Spirit” (MF 171,1.2) and being consistent he went on to specify that this “emptying” involved detaching oneself from “people, riches, comforts” (MDF 79,1) so as to filled “with God” (MF 180,2), with “Jesus Christ” (MF 166,1) and with “the Holy Spirit” (MD 12,3). This emptying of oneself so as to be filled is the dilemma which each Brother must face if he wants to be an interior person able to speak the words of God, “full of divine blessing”, to others.⁹

The Brother must also “reject useless talk” (CL 15, 122,7). In support of this, De La Salle makes use of the scriptural text that “...an account will be given to God of any idle word spoken by man” (Mt 12,36) and goes on to develop this by saying that “time spent in idle talk is wasted time. Idle words profane the heart and lips of a religious” (CL 15, 112,10+) and, according to De La Salle, “useless talk and things” include “being pre-occupied with news or with what is happening” (R 58,11; L 54,4; MF 92,3) and “talking about oneself in the way that seculars do in order to seek appreciation” (CL 25, 76,5; R 173,18). Useless talk conveys nothing of value and does not contribute to authentic conversation. It is based on superficiality, or on a preoccupation with “exterior

things” as De La wrote to one of his Brothers (L 74,7). It can be the cause of “dryness of soul” as can “talking too much” (L 54,6). De La Salle felt that a religious engaged in idle talk was “profaning” what had been sanctified to proclaim the words of salvation and, consequently, he drew the attention of the Brothers to the need for discernment in the use of the tongue (Cf. MF 91 1-2; 92).

1.3.3. *What results from spiritual conversation.*

De La Salle was convinced that the exchange of opinions on spiritual subjects by the Brothers helped them to mature and to grow interiorly and, at the same time, to lead to mutual edification. Recreation, as a time of spiritual conversation, “will prevent dissipation” (MAR 110) and “will make the Brothers interior” (MAR 73). Blain, expressing the opinion of De La Salle on the conversations which the Brothers have in recreation, indicates the beneficial effects to be derived; such conversations “will help them to speak with circumspection, measured and with wisdom; to listen in silence and to profit from what is said. It raises the heart and nourishes piety, it inspires them and turns recreation into a spiritual conference that instructs, animates, produces spiritual joy and fills with God” (Blain 2,138,140).¹⁰

We will concentrate particularly on MD 30 in order to highlight the good effects and results produced by this spiritual conversation in the hearts and souls of the Brothers. The extent to which the Brother gives himself over to God and to the things of God will determine the extent to which he fulfills the will of God. Moreover, the degree of spiritual conversation in the life of the Brother will indicate the depth to which he is “filled” with God. In the same way that the disciples on the road to Emmaus experienced the precious effects of their conversation so the Brother, too, will enjoy a similar experience if his conversations are spiritual. They will “experience Jesus among them” (MD 30,3)¹¹ and will find themselves better informed as to their obligations and more resolved to fulfill them faithfully (MD 30,1). They will come away from such conversations “inspired and determined to do good” (MD 30,3), experiencing the joy of the presence of Jesus and deepened in His love (MD 30,3). De La Salle concludes by asserting that the more the Brothers speak of Jesus, and of

what relates to Him, the more they will come to know Him and relish what is good and what He taught (MD 30,3).

2. DE LA SALLE'S CONCERN TO GUIDE THE BROTHERS WITH REGARD TO CONVERSATION

2.1. De La Salle: a born guide for the Brothers

What Blain wrote about the last years of De La Salle's life in retirement in Rouen could be applied to his whole life; "...He was so zealous that he frequently went to classes to see for himself what was happening. Both pupils and teachers were equally the object of his attention and care" (Blain 2,359). Maillefer adds that "he neglected nothing that could help the Brothers maintain among themselves affectionate and enlightened piety sustained by deep humility and mutual charity. He was concerned with guiding the interior life of the Brothers" (MAR 110). He helped the Brothers to control and direct their speech so as to speak more effectively. Thus, for example, when a Brother spoke to his Director, De La Salle says that "he should do so with profound respect; always in a low voice and in terms which show the respect he has for him" (CL 25, 50,6) while, in speaking among themselves, he says that one should act with simplicity and "avoid all affectation and profuseness" (CL 25, 53,4).

2.2. Characteristics of the speech of the Brother as envisaged by De La Salle

It should be characterized by the following:

* **By sincerity.** It should be characterized by sincerity and coherence as exemplified in De La Salle's own life. Thus, in writing to Gabriel Drolin, he wrote; "...It is not correct that I barely explain myself to you. I tell you the things simply as I think of them" (L 28,25). Similarly, in the manifestation of conscience to the Brother Director, De La Salle indicated that the Brother should do so "by disposing himself to speak with Christian simplicity and sincerity" (R 30,12). He would not tolerate any form of lying and urged the Brothers

"not to permit it in pupils" — a concern which can be evidenced in many quotations (cf CE 157,2; MR 203,2).

* **By few words.** Thus, he wrote to a Director in the following terms; "...When you correct the Brothers do so with few words" (L 71,6). Blain indicates that De La Salle was more concerned with the quality of his speech than with the number of words and that he "taught the Brothers to say much in few words" (Blain 2,304).

* **By reserve with regard to oneself.** Brother Bernard proposes De La Salle as a model in this regard (Bd 22,28) and Blain adds that "he never spoke of anything which could draw praise on himself" (Blain 1,201).¹²

* **By its edifying nature.** Thus he wrote; "...act in such a way that everything about you, your speech and everything you do, leads to virtue" (MF 98,2). In the "Memoir on the Beginnings" (MC CL 10, 105-110) he takes the opportunity to indicate to the Brothers that it is God who has guided him in everything, that all glory should be given to Him, and that his own disposition was one of complete availability to respond to the will of God in his life.

* **By blessing God.** De La Salle made use of every opportunity to praise God and encouraged the Brothers to do the same. He expressed his pleasure when a Brother wrote to him to say that he was happy where God had led him (L 87,1) and expressed similar sentiments when another Brother indicated to him that he was trying hard to correct the defects which De La Salle had pointed out (L 76,2). Blain wrote that De La Salle's most common response to whatever circumstance was "Blessed be God" (Blain 2,96). In his "Meditations for the Time of Retreat", he urged the Brothers "that in every moment they be grateful, praise and give thanks to God for having chosen them and called them to the service of the poor" (Cf. AEP 259).¹³

* **By simplicity.**¹⁴ "The Brother must teach the maxims contained in Holy Gospel" (MD 44,2) and do so "with simplicity, without using pretentious words or with affectation" (R 174,15); rather he should "use words which are easy to understand" (MD 33,3). De La Salle also accentuated the role of silence so as to ensure the effectiveness of what was

taught and thus indicated to the Brother that he should “speak only when it was necessary” (CL 25 42,11) and he added elsewhere that “if the Brother wants his pupils to observe silence it is necessary that it is observed first by the teacher” (CE CL 24, 124,1). He saw silence as being necessary so that the teacher could speak effectively and so that there would be content or “life” in what he said.¹⁵

3. CONCLUSION

As we have indicated, De La Salle was a born guide for the community of Brothers and for pupils. He was with them for almost forty years and was their model and guide. He guided them by his spoken and written word as well as by his unstinting example. According to Blain, “... the life of De La Salle was the Gospel put into practice” (Blain 2,500). He was a model in speech and in listening as well as in keeping silent and all of this was with the intention that the Brother, in imitation of him, “would be skilful in the art of speaking to God, about God and for God” (MD 64,1) because he was convinced that “those who teach others are nothing other than the voice of him who prepares the heart to receive Jesus Christ” (MD 3,1).¹⁶

¹ *Dictionnaire Universel français et latin* (Frenrix), Vol II, p.203. Cf. also Vol III, pp. 418-419.

² *Dictionnaire Spirituel*, Vol II B, pp. 2212-2218. Cf. also VL, Vol II, pp. 418-419.

³ *Dictionnaire Universel*, op. cit.

⁴ POUTET Y., *Le XVIIe siècle et les origines lasalliennes*, Rennes, 1970, Vol I, p. 431. TEMPRADO A., “*La Palabra*” según *La Salle, mística y empleo de la misma en cuanto comunicación espiritual*, Colección: Síntesis nº 13, Instituto Pontificio San Pio X, 1977, pp. 173+.

⁵ De La Salle also recalls this presence of God among the Brothers when he speaks of the presence of God “when they are gathered together”. Cf. GALLEGO S., *Vida y pensamiento de San Juan Bautista De La Salle*, BAC, 1986, pp. 197-199.

⁶ In the Spanish translation - Lima, Peru.

⁷ GALLEGO S., *Vida y Pensamiento de San Juan Bautista De La Salle*, BAC, 477, pp. 305-350.

⁸ Cf. CL 15, p. X. and also RIGAULT G., *Histoire générale de l'Institut des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes*, Vol I, p. 470, “Note to the reader” with respect to the authenticity of the preface which the author attributes to De La Salle.

⁹ GALLEGO S., *op. cit.*, p. 213, nº 30.

¹⁰ On this aspect of recreation cf. TEMPRADO A., *op. cit.*, pp. 163+. According to De La Salle, to speak with “wisdom” was to do so with “tenderness” (MD 33,2); with “gentleness and charity” (MF 115,2); with “reserve, seriousness and good sense” (L 34,8; L 47,12; MD 69,3).

¹¹ BLAIN 2,138 also indicates the presence of God among the Brothers “when they speak of the things of God with simplicity...; at that time God is present amongst them”.

¹² Cf. GUIBERT J., *Histoire de Saint Jean Baptiste De La Salle*, Paris, L. Ch. Poussielgue, 1901, p. 153. “In recreation De La Salle did not permit conversation about those present and made this a point of Rule. He was later to add “if it was not to speak well of them”. In this way he dealt with the situation in which the Brothers might want to speak of him and of the example of his virtue.

¹³ In the Spanish edition - Lima, Peru.

¹⁴ Here we touch on a major theme, which is treated in CE CL 24, pp. 140+, on how the Brother should control his words when correcting pupils so as not to correct with “harsh words” (p. 142). Cf also MR 203 and 204.

¹⁵ GARCÍA HOZ V., *El silencio en el Maestro Lasaliano*, Información Lasaliana 7, pp. 28+.

¹⁶ De La Salle defined prayer as “...Like a conversation with God” (R 120,20); as “a heart to heart dialogue in which a friend shares his secrets with his intimate friend” in the way that Moses communicated with God (I 275). He described mental prayer as “a frequent and wholehearted relationship with God” (MF 177,3).

Complementary Themes:

Pupil; Love; Charity; Community; Heart; Correction; Director, Edification; Ministry; The Holy Spirit; State; Faith; Humility; Teacher, Gentleness; World; Children; Prayer, Piety; Recreation; Rule; Regularity; Religious; Salvation; Saints; Dryness; Silence; Tenderness.

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9. *Vocabulaire lasallien* VII, "conversion" p. 418; "converser" p. 419.

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