

12. CONVERSION

Summary:

1. The word. – 2. The plan of salvation. – 3. Christ's mission. – 4. The Brothers, ministers of Christ. 4.1. His instruments. 4.2. The imitation of Christ. 4.3. Humility and Witness. 4.4. The spirit of Jesus. 4.5. The word. 4.6. Witness. 4.7. Prayer. 4.8. Persecutions. – 5. The aims of the Christian school.

1. THE WORD.

The word CONVERSION is used to express either the passage from unbelief to the Faith, or the passage from a state of sin to that of grace. St. John Baptist de La Salle makes use of these two meanings but that which concerns us more particularly is the second: "You do not have, it is true, pagans to convert; you are however obliged by your profession to teach children the mysteries of our religion and to communicate to them the spirit of christianity, and that is no less a gift than the conversion of infidels" (MF 109.3).

2. THE PLAN OF SALVATION.

As a Doctor in Theology, St. John Baptist de La Salle knows all too well that conversion is the work of God, the fruit of his plan of salvation for all men: "My God, you are the only one who can really touch a heart..." (I. 58). "You say, my God, that heaven exults with joy when a sinner is converted" (I. 213). He basis himself thus on a strong sentiment of faith which prompts him to write, referring to God the Father: "He protests in the Holy Scripture that he does not wish the death of the sinner, but rather his conversion, his life and his salvation" (EM 69).

3. CHRIST'S MISSION.

The will to save mankind finds its realisation

in the person of the Incarnate Word, the Son of God.¹ "His sole aim was the salvation of souls" (Da 33); "It was always with one of these ends in view that Jesus Christ Our Lord behaved in all the visits He made whether it was to convert souls to God, as when He visited Zachaeus, or to bring the dead back to life... or to heal the sick... although He only performed these miracles to win hearts to God" (RB 160); "because He had come, as he Himself states, to convert sinners and urge them to do penance" (Da 32).

This mission,² initiated during His earthly life, goes on in glory, notably through the action of the sacraments: "It is the advantage I enjoy through Holy Communion when having Jesus Christ in my body... I sometimes recall what He suffered to save me; at other times, He reminds me of His assiduous and continuous prayers to His Father and the zeal He shows for my complete conversion" (1.275).

4. THE BROTHERS, MINISTERS OF CHRIST.

4.1. Instruments:

In the Church, Jesus calls also other men to make them take part in His "work" (MD 7.1 -MR 196.1). The Brothers, who are His associates, must be "convinced" that initiative and apostolic fruitfulness depend solely on God and that they are only "Instruments which owe their ability to move towards Him (MR 196), following in this way the

example of the Precursor: "St. John³ wishes to attribute to Jesus-Christ all the honour of the conversion of souls at which he himself was toiling indefatigably and without respite, said that he was only a voice..." (MD 3.1). "Is it not, in fact, wrong to attribute to oneself a work such as the preservation of innocence in children, and the conversion of souls, since this is something which pertains directly to God and to those whom He employs, who should be entirely consecrated to His service, having continual recourse to Him in order to accomplish so great a mission?" (MD 62.1).

4.2. The imitation of Christ.

Knowing therefore that they can do nothing without Him, their main care will be to imitate Him. On the other hand, "He Himself wanted his disciples to witness all the conversions He had made, so that having seen Him at work, they would in all that they undertook win souls to God, learn from and conform to His example" (MR 196.2). And the Founder concludes with a reference to the role of the Brother towards his pupils: "As you take his place, hold yourselves responsible as you have the same mission,⁴ and ask him the graces necessary to bring about the conversion of their hearts" (MD 6.2).

4.3. Humility and obedience.

Now Jesus Christ prepared Himself through submission and obedience to accomplish the great work of the redemption of men and the conversion of souls" (MD 7.1). Similarly, "a life of abjection⁵ and anonymity was... that which the Eternal Father had destined for Jesus Christ until the time He began to preach his Gospel and the conversion of souls, which was the chief reason for his coming" (MD 6-2).

That is why the Founder insists so much on humility and obedience, inseparable virtues which he lays down as a foundation on which his Brothers should be formed and the very exercise of their apostolic life. For "it is to the humble that God gives his graces most abundantly to convert souls, and Jesus Christ explains this well when He says that the only thing He suggests by way of lesson to his holy Apostles, is that they practise humility of

heart to show them that it would make their ministry for the conversion of souls more successful" (MF 79.2).

4.4. The spirit of Jesus.

However, "It would not suffice in order to fulfil the functions of your ministry towards the children, only to follow the example of Jesus Christ in His conduct and the conversion of souls, if you do not adopt His views and His intentions. As He Himself says, He only came on earth, so that men might have life and have it abundantly... That must also be your intention when you instruct your pupils to act in such a way that they lead a Christian life and that your words be for them spirit and life: instruct your pupils⁶ to lead a Christian life and that your words will be for them spirit and life:

1. because they will be produced by the Spirit of God residing in you;

2. because they will provide them with the Christian spirit and that, possessing this spirit which is the spirit of Jesus Christ Himself, they will live this genuine life which is so advantageous for man that it will certainly lead him to eternal life" (MR 196.3).

4.5. The Word.

Because of its spiritual efficacy, St. John Baptist de La Salle recommends the privileged use of the Bible, "this divine word which also is able to so separate the flesh and the spirit and is so necessary to effect the full conversion of a soul" (MF 159.1). He lends more strength to this advice by using the example of St. Bartholomew, Apostle: "to imbibe fully the Gospel truths, he always carried with him in his travels the gospel of St. Matthew, and therein he placed all his trust for the salvation of the souls he converted in such large numbers" (MF 159.1). Nevertheless, discernment must be shown for "to have the gift of tongues means to be able to speak in such a way as to draw souls to God, to bring about their conversion, and to say to each what is most befitting. Souls are not all drawn in the same way, and it is necessary to know how to deal with each in order to lead it to give itself entirely to God" (MD 64.2).

4.6. The witness.

Yet these counsels⁷ would not bear the fruit one would expect from them if they did not rest on the example given by a deeply Christian life: "More than four thousand people followed Jesus Christ in the desert, drawn by the example of His holy life and by the zeal which He showed for the conversion of souls in His fervent sermons" (MD 59.1). This consideration causes the Founder to utter a cry of enthusiasm: "Oh! how strong and efficacious is example to convert souls and make them progress in virtue!" (MF 180.1).

4.7. The prayer.

The Apostolate is also made fruitful by Prayer. In his RECUEIL, St. John Baptist de La Salle puts this question to the Brothers: "Do you pray for the Church, for your Superiors, for your Benefactors, for your friends and enemies, for the conversion of souls, particularly for those for whom you are responsible?" (RD 102). He remarks on this subject: "You have two kinds of children to instruct: those who are idlers⁸ and inclined to evil, and those who are good or who, at least, have a tendency to good. Pray continually for both after the example of St. Marcellinus, and more especially for those who are especially prone to wickedness. Try to preserve the good, and confirm them in the practice of virtue, but your chief efforts and your most fervent prayers should be directed to winning to God the hearts of those who lean towards vice (MF 186.3). Consider Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd of the Gospel... and ask of Him the graces necessary to bring about the conversion of their hearts" (MR 196.1).

4.8. Persecutions.

Salvation comes through the Cross. In the spiritual sphere, God draws the greatest benefit from trials borne for Him: "That is the normal consequence of the trials which are undergone by those who toil to save souls. The greater their difficulties in the apostolic field, the greater also are the conversions God operates through their ministry and the more efficacious their apostolate for the salvation of souls" (MF 126.2).

5. THE FINALITY OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL.

Very curiously, we find once more this literary symmetry in two other texts of the Founder combining the apostolic finality of the school to these two themes dear to him: the spirit of childhood and tenderness.. Here they are: "Do you wish to convert and easily win over to God your disciples? Become children like them, not in prudence, but in cleverness, as St. Paul says. The more you humble yourself, the more also will you like to show little consideration for and hold dear the trials and humiliations aroused against you, to that extent will you touch the hearts of those whom you instruct and encourage them to live truly Christian lives" (MF 79.2). "Strive to manifest as much kindness and love for the children whom you instruct as St. Barnabas showed for those whom he sought to convert. The greater the tenderness you show for the members of Jesus Christ and of the Church, the more wonderful will be the effects of grace which God produces in them" (MF 134.2).

We cannot think of a better conclusion than the following: "As a reward for so much good for this service which He values so highly, God gives all those who work indefatigably to save souls, two kinds of rewards in this world. First an abundance of graces for themselves. Secondly a vaster ministry and a greater facility to bring about the conversion of souls" (MR 207.1).

¹ St. John Baptist de La Salle employs this formula five times only (cf. MD 1.1 - MD 50.2 - WM 65 - 1.52 - Da 86). It is to be found also in MF 168, which is not the Founder's.

² JBS employs this word only five times and never with reference to Christ. In this case, he prefers "Oeuvre" or "ouvrage".

³ In the third part of the Devoirs du Chrétien, JBS advises "to celebrate well the feast of the birth of St. John the Baptist, we must ... thank God who has sent this saint on earth to bring down the spirit of penance and zeal for the salvation of sinners..." (Dc 229).

⁴ Today we would say "to do likewise".

⁵ The word "abjection" expressed in the XVIIth century a very humiliating social status. In religious language, it expresses the sentiment of deep humility experienced by a creature in the presence of God. In current usage, it refers to the lowest grade on the social scale, the scum. Did not St. Paul write: "we have become the refuse of the world and until now the uni-

versal scum" (1 Col. 4.13). There is implied in it, a depreciative note. It is only recently that the meaning of the word has changed to "scorned" "contemptible".

⁶ It is only in the Meditations (for the Sundays, for Feasts and Retreat Time) that St. JBS uses this word when referring to pupils. He underlines in this way the apostolic character of school. In like manner, the teachers are called Brothers. And the profession becomes a ministry. Pedagogy becomes "pastoral": You are the substitutes of the shepherds of the Church" (MD 61.3), "having taken the place of their fathers, their mothers and their pastors... You who hold the place of fathers

and pastors of souls" (MR 202.3).

⁷ In their "instructions" the Brothers must have no other purpose than the conversion of their pupils, following the example of St. Dominic: "The love which this saint had for his neighbour produced in him an ardent zeal for the instruction and the conversion of those who lived a licentious life" (MF 150.2).

⁸ This word is employed to indicate a free-thinker who has emancipated himself from the laws of the Church. St. John Baptist de La Salle calls him impious and worldly. Debauchery brings about disorder, dissoluteness and vice.

Complementary Themes:

Apostle, Goodness, God, Disciple, Church, Child, Holy Spirit, State, Example, Faith, Formation, Humility, Instruction, Joy, Ministry, Mission, Mystery, Prayer, Salvation, Truth, Zeal.

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