

16. DISCIPLES

Summary:

1. "Disciples" in the language of the time. – 2. De La Salle's position. – 3. Biblical influence. – 4. With reference to the Brother. – 5. The Brother: "Disciple and Trainer of Disciples". 5.1. De La Salle's teachings inspired by the Gospel. 5.2. Following the example of the Apostles. 5.3. Means indicated by De La Salle. – 6. "True Christians". – 7. Like the "beloved disciple". – 8. "Followers only of Jesus". – 9. Like the spiritual family of De la Salle.

1. "DISCIPLES" IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE TIME

Saint John Baptist De La Salle used the word DISCIPLES 232 times in his spiritual and pedagogical writings. In doing so, he was aware of the meaning and usage current in his time. When we consulted several "Dictionaries of the French Language" which De La Salle could have used, we found certain elements which were of assistance in helping us to place ourselves in the mind of De La Salle with regard to the word DISCIPLES and to its significance for the Brothers:

* In the "Dictionary of the French Academy", the word DISCIPLE is defined as: "Whoever is taught, by a teacher, any science or any liberal art. Examples: He is my Disciple. To teach his Disciples. To instruct his Disciples. The Disciples of Jesus Christ" (Paris, 1694).

* In addition, in the "Universal Dictionary", the work of Abbot Antoine Furetière, the word DISCIPLE is defined as "Student, one who learns something from his teacher; one who is introduced to the sciences. But, it is only used for the sciences and the liberal arts. To refer to the mechanical sciences, the name "apprentice" is used. In Scriptural terms, the name DISCIPLE OF JESUS CHRIST is applied to the Apostles and to other persons, 72 in all, who were supporters and were united in a

special way to Him and to his preaching". ("Ancient and Modern French Words. The Terminology of the Sciences and of the Arts" 1701).

* The same style of definition and description appears in the "Universal Dictionary of French and Latin", Paris, 1721 and in the "Great French Lexicon", Paris, 1769.

2. DE LA SALLE'S POSITION

We know that De La Salle was open, attentive and sensitive to the new elements which were putting their stamp on the Society of his time, especially in the fields of education and popular culture. It is no surprise, then, that he was careful about the novel information furnished by the Dictionaries of the time: "the sciences; mechanics; apprenticeship". We can find a certain echo in the Lasallian pedagogical writings which were seeking to place the Brothers in the emerging culture which was influencing, in a special way, the "children of artisans and of the poor". The "Lasallian School", we could say today, was already watchful and aware of the concerns of daily life, and realised the necessity of preparation for work as a means of finding occupations. However, we can also find Christian repercussions which a society, like that of the 17th and 18th Centuries, could do no less than emphasise:

“In Scriptural Terms. Disciples of Jesus Christ”.

In fact, the 232 uses made by De La Salle of the word DISCIPLES occur in the framework of a well-defined educational enterprise, which, in its turn, is understood as an act of faith. The Brother is a man of faith, a follower of Jesus Christ, a ‘MINISTER OF GOD, OF JESUS CHRIST AND OF HIS CHURCH’. The Brother welcomes and accompanies a young Christian who, feels himself called to grow in the awareness of his being a son of God. The Lasallian School is identified in itself as a ‘Christian School’ and for this reason, comes into being and develops with the aim of helping the “Christian Spirit” to be a living entity.

3. BIBLICAL INFLUENCE

Of the 232 times that De La Salle uses the word DISCIPLES, 173 of these refer directly either to the experience lived by Jesus Christ with his own DISCIPLES, or to the experience lived by the Apostles and by the Early Church. On 59 occasions, De La Salle places the word DISCIPLES at the heart of the ministerial experience of the Brother: “your DISCIPLES”. It is interesting and important to note that of these 59 occasions, 26 occur in the MTR, which constitute the ‘meditations’ on the MINISTRY of the Brother. The ‘ministry’ of Christian education expresses the specific commitment on the part of the Brother to train ‘DISCIPLES OF JESUS’. By placing us this way in the presence of the word DISCIPLE, De La Salle is showing the strong Biblical origins of discipleship, and in a special way, its roots in the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and St. Paul. It is both enriching and enlightening to reflect on the components offered to us by the “Biblical Lexicons” and the “Dictionaries of the Bible” which we can consult today. (“Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the Bible”, “Dictionary of Biblical Theology”, “Lexicon of Biblical Theology”, “Dictionary of the New Testament”). In all these publications, there are common factors which ‘define’ being DISCIPLES, and living as such. They are as follows:

* When DISCIPLE is mentioned in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, there is never

any reference made to a ‘pupil’ instructed by his teacher. Rather, the close and special relationship that a person has with JESUS is always inferred.

* There are some typical features which define exactly the DISCIPLES OF JESUS, features which do not appear in the DISCIPLES of the Rabbinical Schools:

(a) It is Jesus who chooses and calls his DISCIPLES. (Mark 1, 17; John 1, 35..) In the rabbinical tradition, the DISCIPLE chooses his own Teacher.

(b) The DISCIPLE grows fond of and becomes attached to Jesus, since the authority that emanates from Him leads the DISCIPLE to make his life conform to that of his Teacher. He shows this by a great interior faith and a clear and definite exterior obedience. (Matt. 10, 24; John 6, 60-71) The DISCIPLES of the Rabbis’ search for the science of their teachers.

(c) The DISCIPLE of Jesus is committed to bear witness to his Teacher throughout the whole of his life. (Matt. 10, 37-39; John 15, 18-25) The DISCIPLES of the Rabbis take on a temporary commitment.

In expressing themselves in this way, the books of the New Testament refer, at the outset, to the followers of Jesus, his contemporaries, men and women, small groups or larger ones. The Early Church applies the term DISCIPLE to all Christians, men or women of faith, who form part of the community of those who follow Jesus (Acts 6, 1, 2, 7; 9, 1, 10; 11, 26..).

As we have already stated, when De La Salle uses the word DISCIPLE, he always refers either to somebody who was, during his life, a DISCIPLE OF JESUS, or to someone who, now, is a DISCIPLE OF THE BROTHER, which phrase is used to express, in its turn, a ‘DISCIPLE of Jesus’. Another key factor in the thinking and vocabulary of De La Salle is the parity he establishes between being a “TRUE DISCIPLE OF JESUS” and being a “TRUE CHRISTIAN. These two expressions have, in effect, the same meaning for De La Salle.

In the Preface to “The Duties of the Christian”, De La Salle states: “Christian means DISCIPLE AND IMITATOR of Jesus Christ” (Da IV).

To explain this to the Brothers he adds: "But not all who those proclaim themselves to be Christians are **REAL DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST**". In his inflexible logic, De La Salle highlights the 'conditions' necessary to be a **TRUE DISCIPLE** — which for him is the same as being a **TRUE CHRISTIAN** — of Jesus Christ:

- * "Be animated by the Love of God".
- * "Be animated by the Spirit of Our Lord Jesus Christ".
- * "Lead a life which conforms to His and to His maxims which are found in the Gospels and in the whole of the New Testament" (Da V).

In this way, De La Salle follows the evangelical line of 'interior religion' which is where the true adorer discovers the Father, adores Him and loves Him. It was very important for De La Salle to take this position. The Church was experiencing internal and external tensions. This was the time of the "Religious Wars" when different groups of Christians (heretics and schismatics) were fighting. De La Salle went straight to the heart of the matter and assisted the Brothers to regard and evaluate Christians more by their interior than by the exterior manifestations of their piety. And he applies to these "**TRUE CHRISTIANS**" the same expressions that he writes for the Brothers (probably at the same time) in the important Chapter Two of the Rule: "all their actions should be motivated by the Spirit of God with the sole intention of pleasing Him" (Da IX).

4. WITH REFERENCE TO THE BROTHER

There is, then, a clear purpose in the use made by De La Salle of the word **DISCIPLES**. This is what we are going to attempt to show in these pages. We shall seek, by this means, to establish De La Salle's wishes in respect of the **VOCATION OF THE BROTHER**, a person completely consecrated to Jesus Christ and to the **MINISTRY OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION**, which is carried out by Brothers and by lay persons. Research carried out in the last few decades has enabled us to associate, in Lasallian vocabulary, the Brothers with lay Christian teachers. It is certain that De La Salle wrote his pedagogical and spiritual

treatises for the Brothers. However, the oft-repeated experiences of "The Training College for Rural Schoolmasters" and the first edition (1730) of the "Meditations for the Time of Retreat", 'for the use of all persons who are engaged in the education of youth...', shed much light on what actually takes place in Lasallian Schools, where Brothers and lay teachers are not only happy to **SHARE** in a special way the 'work' or the 'task' but are coming to the point where they **SHARE THE MISSION** and the **LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY**. However, in order to be faithful to the vocabulary used by De La Salle, we shall refer, at this point, to the **BROTHER** as the '**DISCIPLE**' and '**TRAINER OF THE DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST**'. **THE BROTHER AS "DISCIPLE AND EDUCATOR OF DISCIPLES"**.

5. THE BROTHER, DISCIPLE AND TRAINER OF DISCIPLES

5.1. The teaching of De La Salle draws its inspiration from the Gospel

A careful reading of his pedagogical and spiritual writings shows De La Salle's concern to present a twofold image:

JESUS calls his **DISCIPLES** and invites them to follow him so that he can make them "**HIS TRUE DISCIPLES**".

THE BROTHER works in School to make his pupils reach the point of being 'true disciples' which is the same as being "**TRUE DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST**".

* John Baptist has his own disciples; but in the measure that he entered into an understanding of the life and experience of Jesus, he sent his own **DISCIPLES** to Him. (MD 2.1; Dc 245B; MF 78.1; MF 103.1; Mf 173.1).

* Jesus started his mission by calling his **DISCIPLES** so that they would follow Him and He would make them **HIS TRUE DISCIPLES**. De La Salle shows, in fact, how **BEING A DISCIPLE OF JESUS** is the same as "following Jesus". (Da 31B; Dc 229D; MD 39.1; MR 195.3).

* Jesus calls each one of his **DISCIPLES** by name and gives them a personal invitation to fol-

low Him: Simon Peter (Da 49B; 49C; 49D; MF 107.1); Andrew (Dc 245B & C; MF 78.1 & 2); James and John (MF 145.1; Dc 234C; Dc 250C; Dc 251B; Dc 253B, MF 124.1; MF 88 1 & 3); Matthew (MF 167.1); Philip (MF 119.3); Judas (Db 44C; GA 392B); Simon the Zealot and Jude (MF 182.1); Thomas (MF 84.1); Joseph of Arimathea (Da 57B) and Nicodemus (Dc 168A), both of whom were DISCIPLES in secret.

* Jesus establishes his mission on the basis of a COMMUNITY OF DISCIPLES. De La Salle takes up this aspect completely and it is highlighted persistently by Mark's Gospel. (Da 32C; Dc 13B; Da 32B; Dc 263C; Da 35C; Da 36D; Da 42D; Dc 161C; Da 43A; Da 44A; Da 46C; Dc 163A; Dc163C; Da 48A; Da 48B; Dc 173D; Da 63A; Dc 178A; MD 8.1; MD 10.1; MD 202.1; MF 132.2; MF 88.2P).

* Jesus strengthens his COMMUNITY OF DISCIPLES with the gift of the Holy Spirit, who constantly raises up new COMMUNITIES OF DISCIPLES in the Church. (Dc 276C & D; Da 282C; Da 61A; Db 52A; MD. 42.3; MF 107.1; MF 87.1).

* The Risen Jesus strengthens the COMMUNITY OF DISCIPLES by his numerous apparitions. In these, there is a clear educational approach: at times he gave solace and at other times times he gave lessons. (Da 59C; DC 92E; 93A & B; 174D; MD 31.1; MD 43.3; Da 59D; Db 50C; Dc 174C; Db 49C; Db 50A; Dc 173D; Dc 62C).

* For De La Salle, there are features of the ideal experience in the experience of the two DISCIPLES ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS. (Dc 92D; Da 260C; MD 30.1.2.3).

* The "COMMUNITY OF THE DISCIPLES" raises up "new DISCIPLES". (Dc 233D; MF 116.1; Dc 234A; MF 178.1.2; Dc 241A; Dc 240C, MF 99.1; Dc 240D; Dc 244B; MF 134.1.3; RB 219C; MD 69.1; MR 204.2; MR 206.3).

* In addition, the Successors of the Apostles raise up "communities of DISCIPLES": St. Ignatius of Antioch (Mf 102.1.3); ST. Yon and St. Dionysius (MF 168.1).

5.2 Following the example of the Apostles, the Brother is called to live in a community of disciples with his own Brothers.

* In the first place, because the Brother is called to be a "TRUE DISCIPLE OF JESUS CHRIST" (MD 10.1; MF 144.2; MF 159.3; MF 87.1; MR 195.2; MF 79.2; MF 136.2; MF 128.1; MD 44.1).

In the second place, because the Brother is called to make his pupils "TRUE DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST". De La Salle considers that this consists of the ministry of the Brother in the bosom of the Church.

* From the start of his 'Catechism' he poses the following question: Is it enough to be baptised to be a TRUE DISCIPLE OF JESUS CHRIST? (Db 2B; Db 7A & B; GA 307E; 308A).

* In the 'Meditations', De La Salle constantly calls to mind this inherent requirement of the ministry of the Brother: "MAKE SURE THAT THE PUPILS BECOME TRUE DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST" (MF 102.2; MF 116.2; MF 162.2).

* In order to achieve this, De La Salle explains to the Brother how he must perform as a "co-worker with Jesus Christ" in the salvation of children (MR 195.3; MR 196.2; MR 208.1.3).

* And he shows the way: carrying out the work of education with a burning zeal which transforms, by this means, the task into a true MINISTRY (MR 201.1.2; MF 100.2; MF 187.3; MF 153.2; MF 91.3).

5.3 The means indicated by De La Salle for the Brother to work effectively in bringing up his children as "true disciples of Jesus Christ".

A careful reading of the 'Meditations' shows us the attention paid by De la Salle to those means which were most suitable for the ministry of Christian education in a school setting. We shall look at these five exceptionally good means:

* INSTRUCTING the pupils in the Christian Mystery. The Brother must pay great attention

to this as it is a question of his “principal obligation”. In the Lasallian tradition, this means: catechism every day and for the full time as laid down; the daily morning reflection; the Gospel maxims present in various ways in the life of the school; introduction to prayer and the sacraments (MF 100.2; MR 198.1; MR 206.1; MF 69.1; MF 135.3; MF 92.3; MR 194.3; MR 196.3; MR 198.3; MR 207.2; MD 69.1; MF 135.2; MR 200.3).

* Helping pupils to live **FAITH EXPERIENCES**. For De La Salle, ‘religious instruction’ is by no means a theoretical and external presentation of ‘Christian dogma’. Every ‘word of faith’ is placed by De La Salle in a ‘context of faith and this leads to the living of ‘faith experience’.

* De La Salle sums up all this in the word **PIETY**: ‘inspire them with piety’; ‘to grow in piety’(MD 61.3; MF 114.2; MF 115.1; MF 126.3; MF 160.1; MR 200.3; MR 208.1).

* De La Salle places **REPRIMAND** and **CORRECTION** in this context of ‘faith experience’. He is a realistic educator and is aware of what is going on in the society of his time. Consequently, he knows that the pupils are not always conscious of their own way of life, nor of that of their own families. He also knows that pupils let themselves be led astray by a tendency to evil, by bad habits and by bad example (MR 198.2; MR 203.1.3; MR 204.1.2.3).

* For this very reason, De La Salle insists that, for the Brother, **TEACHING SHOULD ALWAYS BE ACCOMPANIED BY EXAMPLE**. In the context of the society and the Church of his time, a society and a Church permanently drawn between explicit laxity and explicit severity, De La Salle knows that the pupil must ‘see’ in the Brother a living, close, familiar and inspiring **DISCIPLE OF JESUS CHRIST**; he must show the topicality and the strength of the Word which he proclaims to them (MD 69.1; MF 135.2). In addition, De La Salle reaches the point where he talks of “holiness to an uncommon degree” (MD 39;2) which the Brother acquires and lives up to in carrying out his teaching ministry.

* De La Salle also knows, and he knows through experience, that the ‘key’ to all education, and in particular, Christian education, is the qual-

ity of the **PUPIL-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP**. We believe that one of the best texts which deal with this is that of Meditation 33: it concerns the interpretation that De La Salle makes of the ‘Gospel of the Good Shepherd’ in the light of, and in order to apply it to, the ministry of the Brother in the Christian school.

But De La Salle uses other phrases which stress the importance of the quality of the pupil-teacher relationship:

* The phrase “to touch hearts” (MD 43.3; MD 67.1; MF 139.3; MR202.3) expresses, in Lasallian terms, the whole power of the pupil-teacher relationship which the Brother can experience in the School, at every moment, “from morning to evening”. This “touching hearts” is always accompanied by significant, specific and caring actions.

* To be very patient with the pupils (L 54.10; L 156.3; MD 76.2).

* To show them affection and kindness (RC 14.13; 14.14). “You should also show them maternal kindness (MF 101.3). De La Salle makes use of similar language when he is speaking about the relationship of the Brother with the mothers of the pupils (RC 45.11).

6. “TRUE CHRISTIANS”

It seems to us that this expression is the high point of De La Salle’s teaching on **DISCIPLESHIP**. In fact, in his writings, De La Salle associates the expression “true Christians” to:

* “The purpose of the work” which the Brother does (MF 150.2);

* the daily making known of “the truths of faith and the Gospel maxims” (MF 160.3);

* “touching the hearts” of the pupils (MF 86.3).

This way of acting leads, in effect, to living as “**TRUE CHRISTIANS**”.

“Your work does not consist in making your pupils Christians, but rather in making them true Christians. This is all the more necessary as it would avail them but little to have received Baptism if they did not live according to the Christian

spirit. But that we impart the spirit of Christianity to others, we must possess it ourselves. This involves, no doubt, observing what the Gospel teaches us. Read the Gospel, then, often, with attention and with affection, and let it be your chief study especially to put it in practice” (MF 171.3).

7. LIKE THE “BELOVED DISCIPLE”

In Meditation 88, De La Salle presents the ‘model of the disciple of Jesus’ in the person of Saint John, the BELOVED DISCIPLE. Following the teaching of the Fathers, De La Salle underlines three aspects of St. John’s life in his role as Jesus’ BELOVED DISCIPLE and applies them to the life and ministry of the Brother:

* ‘Jesus let him lay his head on his breast’. “You are in a profession in which you need to be honoured with the friendship of Jesus. Cherish this virtue, therefore, which was Jesus’ favourite, so that our Divine Saviour may love you tenderly and take pleasure in remaining with you. His delight is to be with pure men”.

* ‘Jesus revealed to him the highest mysteries of His divinity and His humanity’. “Apply yourself also to mental prayer, and therein Jesus will reveal to you secrets unknown to most men”.

* ‘Jesus entrusted him to His Mother and made him an adopted son of the Virgin Mary’. “If we truly love Jesus and are in return loved by Him, we are assured of Mary’s dearest and most tender affection. As there is a close relationship between Jesus and His most holy Mother, those who really love Jesus and are loved by Him, greatly honour Mary and are fondly cherished by this holy Mother of God”.

8. “FOLLOWERS OF JESUS ONLY AND WORKING SOLELY FOR HIM”

This states the purpose of the Brother’s work which is transformed into a genuine MINISTRY. Hence we believe that De La Salle presents the aim of the whole process of DISCIPLESHIP in the school:

“If you are a true lover of Christ, you will take

every possible means to instil His holy love in the hearts of your children whom you train to be His DISCIPLES, and your aim will be that they think often of Jesus, their good and only Master; that they speak frequently of Jesus, that they aspire only after Jesus, and that they live for Him alone” (MF 102.2).

9. LIKE THE LASALLIAN SPIRITUAL FAMILY

We conclude these reflections by opening ourselves up to the reality of the Lasallian Family as a spiritual family. What we have just said about the Brother and for the Brother, we could say about all Lasallians and we must apply it to every Christian teacher who looks on John Baptist De La Salle as his TEACHER and as his spiritual FATHER.

The Rule expresses this clearly and positively: “The Spirit of God has given to the Church, in the person of St. John Baptist De La Salle, a charism which even today inspires the Brothers and a great number of other educators” (20). ...“who want their professional work to be a form of Gospel ministry” (17).

The “LETTER TO THE LASALLIAN FAMILY” takes this view by giving an account of the experiences undergone by St. John Baptist De La Salle and applying them to today’s Lasallians, Brothers, Sisters and Lay People.

“(De La Salle) was also very far from suspecting that thousands of lay men and women, young people and adults, would take their inspiration from him, from his powerful example and from his teachings, in their commitment to live their lives as Christians.

John Baptist De La Salle and his first disciples were acutely aware of the social problems of their times. Struck by the educational needs of society around them, their response was to found schools. As true DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST, they made them places where the “spirit of Christianity” could flourish”.

De La Salle has not lost his appeal.

“Something very important is happening now-a-days in ‘Lasallian circles’: for several years now, there has been a growing interest in De La Salle,

and in devotion to him... We can confirm that many teachers these days share the spiritual ideals, aims and educational approach of De La Salle; and that Christian as he was, and open to the inspiration of the Spirit as he was, they too seek to promote spiritual values, in particular the dignity of the individual, and are committed to doing so" (Pp. 8 & 9).

It is necessary, then to read the texts of De La Salle on DISCIPLESHIP as 'new keys' which show St. John Baptist De La Salle's talent for raising up DISCIPLES both within and without the Institute which he founded:

* the 'key' of LASALLIAN LAY TEACHERS, men and women who believe in Jesus Christ

and want to be his DISCIPLES in the world of education, especially through the medium of the school;

* the 'key' of LASALLIAN LAY TEACHERS who, belonging to other 'religious groups', look on St. John Baptist De La Salle as a "Spiritual Man", and draw their inspiration from him.

In this way, Lasallian Schools are continuing to be special places for the training and growth of DISCIPLES. "We are very pleased to see the extent to which Lasallian educational communities everywhere have helped to integrate and unite various religious and cultural groups, by promoting mutual understanding, respect, tolerance and support" (Letter to the Lasallian Family. p. 10).

Complementary Themes:

Good manners and Politeness; Goodness; Gentleness; Catechism; Christian; Heart/Touch hearts; Commandments; Conversion; Duties of a Christian; Kindness Child/Pupil/Disciple; Education/Educate; Spirit of Christianity; Example; Edification; Christian teacher; Reflection; Teacher-Pupil relations; Vigilance.

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