

# 24. GOD'S ROLE

## Summary:

1. God's Part in the history of the world and that of man. 1.1. In the creation of the world. 1.2. In the management of the world. 1.3. In the work of salvation. – 2. God's role in the life of St. La Salle. 2.1. In the choice of his vocation. 2.2. In the foundation of his Institute. 2.3. When faced with an apparent failure. – 3. La Salle teaches us to correspond to God's will. 3.1. The Brother must be led by the "movement of the Spirit". 3.2. God's expressed desire compels man to abandon himself to Divine Providence. 3.3. God's will presumes discernment.

## INTRODUCTION

The theme of "God's Role" is an essential element in the Life and work of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. It distinguishes his entire spirituality and is to be found in all his writings.

Throughout his life, and particularly during the forty years during which he toiled to found the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, he tried to discern and to correspond with the grace of God in his own life, to be faithful to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, in order to carry out God's projects and not his own. He urged the Brothers to pay attention to God's wishes: in the world and in the Church, in their own personal life and in that of their pupils, and to follow them faithfully.

This is tantamount to saying that the theme "God's Role" refers to other complementary themes which will be dealt with in greater detail: discernment, the role of the Spirit, the effects of grace, man's co-operation towards the realisation of God's plan, the teacher's duty to help the children correspond to it... For God's role has its natural corollary which is man's reaction, his correspondence to God's biddings, his fidelity. That is why we stress here God's role in the salvation of man, by quoting the personal example of St. John Baptist de La Salle.

## 1. GOD'S ROLE IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD AND THAT OF MANKIND

Henceforth, the Jews set about Jesus who had done that on the Sabbath day. But Jesus answered them: "My Father, up till now, is at work and I too am at work" (Jn 5.16-17). The work of God, the role God plays, are evidenced in the creation of the world, in his control over History and in the task concerned with the salvation of man through redemption and sanctification, and all that through an entirely gratuitous act of love so that "his name may be sanctified" (Mt 6.9).

### 1.1. In the creation of the world

The first pages of the Book of Genesis constitute a solemn manifestation of the creative power of God. Creation was not by chance: it is "God's work". The sacred author proclaims then: "God saw all that he had done. There, it was very good" (Gn 1.31). In a thousand different ways the pious Jew repeated this profession of faith: "I meditate on what thou hast done" (Ps 143,5); "The heavens are the work of your hands" (Ps 102,26). "In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it; for his hands formed the dry land" (Ps 95,4-5).

In this same contemplation, La Salle invites his Brothers to pray: "You are, my God, in me and in all creatures, and they subsist thanks to you and because you reside in them" (EM 14).

### 1.2. In the management of the world

With the creation of man begins the history of salvation. God places his creation in the hands of his intelligent creature, made in "his image and likeness" (Gn 1.26) so that man may be God's co-operator" (1 Cor. 3.9): "Fill the earth and rule over it" (Gn 1.28).

Unfortunately, using the freedom granted to it, the human creature controlled events according to its own desires or will, contravening the orders of Him who had made him. Apparently, the world is ruled by men towards a destiny chosen by themselves but which fails to correspond with the creator's designs.

However, God did not create an empty world, quite the opposite, he "made it to be lived in" (Is. 45.18) and "he rules over it wisely" says La Salle in one of his meditations (MF 163.1). Far from yielding to fatalism, we must admit that "God writes straight on crooked lines", as a popular saying goes. Sometimes, it may appear that some people hinder or render useless God's plans. Thus, Saul laid waste the Church; he entered the houses and snatched from them men and women whom he put in prison" (Ac 8.3) or it was Assyria that destroyed the Kingdom of Israel. In both cases, God calls them "instruments chosen by his hands" (ac 9.15) or "the bludgeon of his wrath" (Is 10.5). What it all boils down to is that those who try to oppose the Creator's plans are precisely those who contribute to carry them out. "For God has placed in their heart the will to carry out his plans" (Ap 17.17).

### 1.3. In the work of salvation

What is taking place in the macrocosm is also happening within each human creature, through what we call grace. By grace, is meant here God's bursting in, his intervention in people to stimulate them to behave the way the Creator wants them to. Or, as La Salle thinks, actual grace "is a supernatural light or a good inspiration which God

gives us to help us avoid evil and do good" (Da 196). Much more recently, Louis Evely wrote that "God's assistance is always one of love., a warning, a presentation, a pardon" (Louis Evely: "La prière de l'homme moderne p. 112). In point of fact, "Nobody can come to me if he is not allowed to do so by the Father" (Jn 6.65). For that to take place, God leads certain persons "availing himself of their human contacts, their bonds of love (Os 11.4). And La Salle repeats, quoting the Book of Proverbs, that "Only God can direct our steps" (MD 3.2).

Thus, influenced by these attachments, certain persons are able to work out remarkable feats, as we can see illustrated in the lives of the saints whom Siracide offers us as models (Ecus 44.1-5). "For the love of Christ controls us" (2 Cor 5.14), without however depriving us of the freedom to resist. But when love triumphs, nobody can "boast as if it were not a gift" (1 Cor 4.7). God does it out of love for his name, for his own sake, for his own cause and so that his name may be sanctified (Is 48.9-11).

## 2. HOW GOD ACTED IN THE LIFE OF ST. LA SALLE

"God acted in the life of La Salle to direct it towards his service and the service of others, inspiring him with the concrete answers which he made to the various demands made on him during his life" (AEP 25) and especially in the choice of his vocation in the foundation of the Institute, and even when he had to face an apparent failure.

### 2.1. In the choice of his vocation

In the search for his vocation, La Salle does not experience any extraordinary phenomenon, as Saul had, for example (Ac. ch.9) and other great men of God. The Lord leads him in a normal way and sometimes he even complicates matters for him, depriving him for example of his father and mother in succession. However, La Salle is before anything else, and very early, a soul that God himself chisels and moulds with his own hands. (Père Rayez: *La spiritualité d'abandon de SJBDS*). Biographers draw our attention to La Salle's love,

even as a child, for things connected with God. Maillefer puts it as follows: "He is a holy priest whom God is leading through paths that are simple but tough on nature.

Whilst training him in the practice of virtue, he teaches him the great value of what is good, and grants him the experience he needs to train others in its practice (MAR 15).

Without any doubt Blain's panegyric is somewhat exaggerated when it states: "Nothing childish in him" (Blain 1.118). On the other hand, Maillefer and Bernard do not describe him differently. What is certain is, that very soon, La Salle started thinking in earnest about his vocation, for he was sensitive to the mystery of "the presence of the Lord in his personal history (AEP. 26). God's action made him discover certain religious values which he gradually assumed.

The priesthood was one of the values which attracted him most. God's guidance makes use also of psychological elements to lead a person the way it wishes. Thus, "his pleasure was to erect chapels, to decorate altars, to sing hymns, to imitate religious ceremonies" (Blain 1.118). In these conditions, one is not surprised that at eleven years of age he received the tonsure (Blain 1.121), which prepared him for the priesthood. Nevertheless, "he had trodden paths known to him only imperfectly (MAR. 19).

Everything seems to be working according to his plans. When, at seventeen years of age, La Salle comes across another value: that of becoming a Canon of the Cathedral. And Blain remarks that only souls of that quality does God lead by the hand since childhood (Blain 1.121). The priesthood and the canonicate can very well go together. But it was not without difficulty that La Salle attained his goal. It was only eleven years after he had been appointed canon, and after he had experienced suffering and death that he was ordained priest on April 9, 1778.

As soon as he reached the "promised land" of the priesthood, La Salle began to question himself about his situation. God's urgings never let him be satisfied with his canonicate and priesthood. Out of the blue comes a very interesting prospect: to be put in charge of a parish. This is presented to him as a better proposal and he is invited to exchange his canon's stall for a parish (Blain 1.134-135).

Having thought matters over and asked advice, it is his Archbishop that urges him to make a decision, even though it were more advantageous, not be a parish priest but to remain a canon (Blain 1.193).

## 2.2. In the foundation of the Institute

Little by little, God seems to create events that will lead La Salle to walk along the path chosen for him. La Salle is aware of this for "God leads everything wisely" and he called the budding Institute "God's work: Domine, opus tuum" (RI 8).

God makes use of Monsieur Nyel to show La Salle another evangelical value: the service of the poor. As this was a far cry from the education he had received in his family, La Salle took some time to study this value. He thought that the help he was giving Monsieur Nyel at the start would only "be peripheral and without any personal commitment whatsoever" (Blain 1.167). Biographers point out that it took La Salle no fewer than four years (1679-1682) to assume fully the value of the Christian education of the poor. "At the end of 1682, it seemed to him (he himself said) that God was calling him to take over the Schools; and that having always to be first to attend all the spiritual exercises of the community, he could not also take part in the Office as assiduously as his Director expected him to. So, convinced for all the reasons which have been mentioned, he decided to give up his stall in the Cathedral Chapter; however he did not find his spiritual director willing to give his consent" (Blain 1.193 cf. also Bernard 49).

But the young priest, "in spite of his extreme reluctance" (Blain 1.143), never abandoned the first teachers. In fact, here is what he writes in the "Mémoire des Commencements": "For, quite naturally, I rated below my valet those who, in the early stages, I had to employ in the schools"... (Blain 1.169). If he employed teachers, that meant that he did not allow the schools to be entirely under the control of Monsieur Nyel.

The crucial moment for him to decide to found the Institute came when God showed him the evangelical importance of the Christian education of the poor as more important than his canonicate. Then without any hesitation, he took the step «which is rarely approved of" (Blain 1.193) and

discovered the way God wanted him to follow”.

This shows that La Salle had entrusted himself blindly to God’s will that led to the foundation of the Institute. Yet we must not forget that personal co-operation too is an essential factor. Hence, when the crisis worsened, he resolved to bind himself by vow to found and maintain the said institution, without allowing himself to give it up, even if the three Brothers who had made the vow were to be left alone in the Society and had to live only on bread” (cf. Formula of the Heroic Vow in Blain 1.313).

### **2.3. When faced with an apparent failure**

La Salle was convinced that he was not acting alone but that God’s work required his collaboration. Once he had convinced himself that the undertaking of the Christian schools was built on a solid enough foundation, he realised, towards the end of 1690, that “it was not progressing and he feared lest it come to nought” (Blain 1.312). Faced with this sad situation, the saint not only prayed: “Domine, opus tuum” and awaited God’s reaction. Quite the contrary, he undertook the necessary steps to give fresh impetus to the Society: the heroic vow and care in the formation of the Brothers. These practices too constitute a divine intervention since it is God who had inspired La Salle to adopt them.

Several other events even more cruel were to take place in his life later on: his removal from the Direction of the Community, his being accused of administrative incompetence, the desertion of several of the Brothers he trusted, the plunder of the schools... All that, made him wonder whether he himself did not bring that about and that God did not seem to answer his prayers.

Left to his own devices, he tried to seek refuge in prayer and solitude hoping that God would let him know what he wanted him to do. What he refused to give him through prayer, God made known to him through the Letter of the Brothers of April 7, 1714: “Sir and very dear Father, we, the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools.... order you... to take over immediately the general management of our Society” (MAR 227). God’s voice could not have been any clearer: God was acting through the Community of the Brothers.

La Salle got up and obeyed.

### **3. LA SALLE TEACHES US TO CORRESPOND TO GOD’S BIDDINGS**

If these examples culled from the life of the Founder do not convince, one may add that he worked hard to convince the Brothers to correspond to the will of God. He wanted them to feel led by the Holy Spirit, to place themselves entirely in the hands of Providence and to try hard to discover, to discern this divine will.

#### **3.1. The Brother must allow the Holy Spirit to act in him**

In the XVIIth century, the word “action” meant a show of force, or of ability or a habit one has to do things. However, La Salle, being a doctor in theology, seems to use the word in its etymological meaning i.e. “The strength to get things done”.

Thus, God’s will is carried out through the action of the Holy Spirit. La Salle wants his Brothers to feel moved by the power of the Holy Spirit. And the reflection he proposes to them for Pentecost Sunday is the following: “Thus should the Holy Spirit make his in-dwelling in you to-day, that you may no longer live or have movement but in him” (MD 43.1), for “you should live there-in and be conducted solely by the spirit and the light of faith. Only the Holy Spirit can give you these dispositions” (MD 43.2). Therefore if the Brother is to be led solely by the Holy Spirit, he must not be led by his own will in his employment (MR 195.2 and R. 186.XI), nor allow nature to have any part in what he does (MD 45). That is, act for purely human and natural motives or according to his personal inclinations (MD 45.3).

In the Explanation of Mental Prayer, the Founder invites the Brothers to pray thus: “How kind of you, my God, to place in me your Holy Spirit; it is surely to guide me and to direct me in my conduct. Thus your intention is that I do nothing except through the movement of the divine Spirit” (EM 18).

### 3.2. God's will requires that we abandon ourselves to Providence

Faith in Divine Providence seems to be a characteristic of La Salle who, in fact, never stops exhorting the Brothers to trust the Provident God. This trust implies that we allow God to carry out his divine plans, without hindering him. That is what La Salle says repeatedly assuring us that God will see to it that we will want for nothing (MD 59.2), that we must abandon ourselves to God without worrying and without trying to seek peace by our own means (MD 20.2).

This saint who always insisted on "wanting to see clearly, in whatever I undertake" relinquishes his will into the hands of God and does himself what he advises Bro. Drolin to do, to leave to God the care, the direction and the risks in everything (L. 21.17). La Salle does not like human views (L. 24.13) because "rest assured that you will do good in the Church only in so far as you are filled with faith, and conduct yourself by the Spirit of Faith, which is the spirit of your Institute with which you should be animated" (MF 139.2).

The Brother must realise that it is God who first called him to the ministry: "Adore God's providence in withdrawing you from the world to enable you to practise and acquire virtue. This is necessary for you in the accomplishment of your duties of state" (MF. 131.1). He dwells on the idea that the Brother is an instrument in the hands of God for the pupils because it is God who illumines the hearts of those he destined to teach his Word to children, to impart instruction, and to manifest his glory. That is why the Brother may consider himself the minister of God and the dispenser of his mysteries (MR 193.1).

### 3.3. God's action implies discernment

Once God's will manifests itself ordinarily in the good inspirations which urge us to move on to action, we must be careful not to let ourselves

become the victim of ambiguity in our personal inspirations. St. John warns us: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God" (Jn 4.1). Consequently, La Salle sought advice from competent persons and used to say: "Never trust to your own lights or even to those which seem to come from God. Make everything known to those who direct you, and submit yourself to their judgment" (MF. 99.3). "So it often happens that you believe you are doing good and yet do not realize any, either with regard to yourself or others, because in what you undertake you are guided only by self-will" (MD 57.1).

Discernment is carried out normally in community, in an atmosphere of prayer and faith, when everybody listens to God and his Brothers, making oneself available and without prejudice. That is why, we read in the old Rule, there must always be a deep community spirit in the Institute.

True discernment implies prayer and advice. Blain has kept for us a prayer which St. La Salle used to say when in need of inspiration to find what God desired him: "My God, I do not know whether I should set up the Institute or not..." (Blain 1.218).

Together with prayer, one of the most efficacious means to seek discernment is reflection during the retreat. "It is thus that we are able to speak boldly and fruitfully about God and make him known to those who are plunged in the depths of ignorance and sin, and living in a blindness which they themselves are not aware of, when we ourselves have become filled with the spirit of God in solitude" (MF 100.2).

The other way to obtain discernment is to ask advice from spiritually-wise persons. That is also what the Founder recommends constantly to the Brothers: "In like manner, God desires that you should apply to those who conduct you... even though there are times when this may appear useless, and when you are in a state in which it seems futile" (MD 20.1).

**Complementary Themes:**

Abandonment, God's leadership, Counsels, Conversion, Correction, Disciple, Holy Spirit, Fidelity, Faith and Spirit of Faith, Grace, Inspirations, God's word, the Presence of God, Simple attention-Contemplation, Union with God, the Will of God.

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