

# 27. HYMNS

## Summary:

1. Terminology. – 2. Hymns used in the Christian Schools (1705). – 3. Content and sources of the hymns. – 4. Were the hymns part of the original catechesis? – 5. Use of popular melodies. – 6. Was De La Salle the author of any of the hymns? – 7. Did De La Salle have a «theory» for the use of the hymns? – 8. Conclusion.

## 1. TERMINOLOGY

In the writings of John Baptist de La Salle the word “cantiques” refers to the canticles of the Old and New Testaments. Among the public prayers used by the Church La Salle mentions the canticles of praise and thanksgiving.<sup>1</sup> In the third part of the *Devoirs d'un Chrétien*<sup>2</sup> he includes among the canticles: Alleluia, Magnificat, Benedictus, or speaks in general of “the psalms and holy canticles, or even of “the hymns and canticles”. For him, then, the canticles were any liturgical singing.

If La Salle uses the word *cantique* (which is being translated in this English article by the word “hymn”) in a very broad sense of “spiritual hymns”, he says nothing about “spiritual songs” (*chansons spirituelles*).<sup>3</sup> He limits his use of the word *chanson* almost entirely to indecent (*déshonnêtes*) songs, or by saying that “a Christian does not allow himself to sing every sort of song”.<sup>4</sup>

This article is not intended to deal with the history of hymns, which may be found in many historical studies.<sup>5</sup> The focus of this article is to present the use of hymns in the educational program of La Salle and to clarify the facts in this matter.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. HYMNS USED IN THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

It is difficult to prove that La Salle used hymns

before 1703, let alone what hymns he may have used. But there is mention of hymns in the list of publications or manuscripts that La Salle presented on November 2, 1702 for approbation and permission to publish.

It is possible that the editor to whom La Salle gave his rights at the beginning of 1703<sup>7</sup> published the first edition of *Cantiques spirituels* in 1705. It is certain that in the text of the permission granted to Antoine Chrétien on April 13, 1705<sup>8</sup> there is mention of the *Cantiques spirituels*. Further detail is unnecessary: the fact is that La Salle used a collection of hymns in his schools at least as early as 1705 and perhaps earlier.<sup>9</sup>

## 3. CONTENT AND SOURCES OF THE HYMNS (COLLECTION OF 1705)

The collection is divided into three parts:

1 – Hymns that are assigned to be sung before the catechism lesson each day of the week (six hymns only);

2 – Hymns used to teach the truths that Christians must believe in order to be saved;<sup>10</sup>

1 – Hymns for the principal feast and solemnities of the year.<sup>11</sup>

It has now been established that the 58 hymns

of the 1705 collection were for the most part borrowed from texts already in use. This is not to say that the exact sources have been established, but at least there is no question about the fact that they were borrowed.

In chronological order the sources, in whole or in part, for the hymns used by La Salle were:

1669 – Martial de Brives, *Cantiques spirituels de l'âme dévote pour l'instruction et la consolation d'une âme dévote*.<sup>12</sup>

1671 – I.P.M., *Cantiques sacrés d'un solitaire*.<sup>13</sup>

1687 – D'Heauville, *Catéchisme en Cantiques*.<sup>14</sup>

1696 – Frézelière, *Cantiques spirituels recueillis et mis en ordre par le commandement de Mgr. de la Frézelière*.<sup>15</sup>

1700 – Nully, éditeur, *Cantiques spirituels sur les principaux mystères de notre religion pour les missions et les catéchismes*, nouvelle édition, approbation 1699.<sup>16</sup>

1701 – Pellegrin, Simon-Joseph, abbé, *Chansons spirituelles*.<sup>17</sup> La Salle kept two songs in this collection which were composed for the time of the Jubilee which was celebrated in France in 1701.

This last fact suggests some questions. Was it the universal celebration of the Jubilee in France during 1701 that led La Salle to include in his collection the two hymns composed by Pellegrin especially for this occasion? Does this suggest that there was a collection prior to 1705, since it is doubtful that La Salle would insert these two hymns composed for the Jubilee once that event had passed? Keep in mind that the next Jubilee would not take place for another 20 years. Was another collection used in the schools which was presented for the approbation of Elies du Pin in January, 1703?<sup>18</sup>

How many editions of the *Cantiques spirituels* were printed during John Baptist de La Salle's life? One was discovered in 1987 which was printed in 1714. The editor was Pellegrin, but he states clearly that the edition was made with the permission of M. Jean Baptist de La Salle in 1711,<sup>19</sup> and he carefully indicates which hymns he kept from the edition that had been made earlier<sup>20</sup> by La Salle himself.

The editions of 1721 and others which did not

exist during the lifetime of La Salle are not within the purposes of this article.

#### 4. WERE THE HYMNS PART OF THE ORIGINAL CATECHESIS?

Overlooking the fact that catechetical methods have developed through the course of history, some people are suggesting that the hymns were used in the 18th Century to dispose the students to the special topic of the catechism lesson. According to this hypothesis, which has not been demonstrated, the teacher would select from the collection a hymn that would reflect the subject of the lesson. There is very little truth to this theory.

In the 1705 edition there are six hymns intended to begin the catechism lesson; each one is assigned to a particular day of the week. It was not until the 1714 edition that a seventh hymn, the one to the Holy Spirit, was assigned to Sunday. Meanwhile a choice could be made from the second section of the *Cantiques*, which contained hymns for the principal feasts and solemnities of the year, e.g., for the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and other feasts of the year.

The *Conduite des Ecoles* of 1706<sup>21</sup> and the *Règle des Ecoles*<sup>22</sup> prescribe a hymn after evening prayer at the time the students are leaving the school. It suggests that the hymn was not considered as a preparation for catechism, but as a moment of relaxation, like the prayers recited by the monks going from one place to another, even as the Brothers themselves prior to 1705<sup>23</sup> recited the *Ecce quam Bonum* while leaving the refectory at noon. It was a kind of musical accompaniment that promoted good order, rhythm, appropriate thoughts. No more than six verses were sung while the students would be leaving the school.

The *Exercices de Piété* gives some directions for the hymns. But the only edition available now is the one of 1760; the practices proposed in this edition cannot be claimed as the same as those of 1705. Nevertheless, the prescriptions of the *Conduite* of 1706 and those of the *Exercices* are the same in many respects.

Apart from these facts it is impossible to pass a better judgment on the validity of certain rather speculative practices which have been proposed

regarding the use of the *Cantiques* in the schools during La Salle's lifetime.<sup>24</sup>

## 5. THE *CANTIQUES SPIRITUELS* AND DRINKING SONGS

The development of the use of hymns was not exactly part of the Counter Reformation. Gastoué places the *Cantilène de sainte Eulalie*, along with many other examples, as a forerunner of the use of hymns.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, the Counter Reformation did promote singing of the Psalms and many spiritual songs in French,<sup>26</sup> which was, in fact, a part of the development of French literature.

Some of those who were promoting the singing of hymns justified the practice by referring to Saint Paul (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:26); others cited Saint Augustine or other Fathers of the Church. Their general purpose was to counter the influence of drinking songs, or indecent (*déshonnêtes*) songs referred to by La Salle. He says, ...“it is very unbecoming for a Christian to sing songs which might lead to impiety, which glorify loose living, or which contain expressions and words suggesting that it is an honor and a great pleasure to drink to excess”. He advised that “as a Christian you do not allow yourself to sing indecent songs, or those where the words are too explicit, or contain ambiguous meanings”.<sup>27</sup>

This concern explains why La Salle generally excluded from his collection those songs whose words were composed to melodies that would evoke other words not exactly religious. Some expressions on the surface, such as the title, “Love in a Hospice, could suggest a risqué adventure, even though it happens to be a hymn of Father Martial de Brives about the mystical wounds of divine love. Besides, the words in another hymn of Brives, based on a popular melody, have for title, “Friends, Let's Not Skip Creteil”.

The *Cantiques* raises complex questions when an attempt is made to trace the melodies. Often the same notation is used for quite different words, because new words are adapted to the melodies; also a new use is made of the same song, which in turn becomes a new way to interpret the melody to which the words are sung. It is only af-

ter careful research that this borrowing is discovered. It also happens that different melodies are used for the same words.

## 6. IS LA SALLE THE AUTHOR OF SOME OF THESE HYMNS?

Present research tends to affirm that most of the hymns in the collection of 1705 were borrowed.<sup>28</sup> Eventually perhaps, further research will discover the sources for the fifteen or so texts for which the sources are presently unknown. It would certainly be unfounded to hastily conclude at this time that La Salle himself is the author of these texts, that he had the leisure to compose these hymns. There is more reason to believe that he was able to eliminate verses that did not suit the needs of the young students in his schools, or that he chose an expression here and there that would be more understandable to them, or that he limited the hymns to a maximum of six verses. La Salle's action can probably be restricted to this kind of work in preparing the texts of the *Cantiques* for the use in the Christian Schools.

Did La Salle have an agreement with Pellegrin concerning the edition of 1714? Since La Salle had already borrowed some texts from the *Chansons spirituelles* of Pellegrin, it is reasonable to presume that Pellegrin was able to arrive at an understanding with La Salle to make use of the permission for printing the previous edition, to which allusion has been made. If that is the case, it seems to have been agreeable to the Brothers also, because the edition of 1721 which was used in the schools, was still indebted in large part to Pellegrin. We do not have at this time the editions that fill the gap between 1721 and 1760;<sup>29</sup> they would throw valuable light on the evolution of our collection of the *Cantiques*.

## 7. DID LA SALLE HAVE A “THEORY” FOR THE USE OF THE HYMNS?

In the 1706 edition of the *Conduite des Ecoles* Chapter 10 contains nothing but the title, “*Des Cantiques*”. In fact, it is rather in the following Chapter Eleven that La Salle explains how the

hymns are to be used. It is quite possible that there were not two chapters, but only one with the title “Hymns and the Departure from School”, or “The Hymns for the Departure from School”, if we focus on how the hymns were to be used.

If the *Conduite* was supposed to have a separate chapter on the hymns, it would have appeared in the 1720 edition to make up for its absence in the 1706 edition. But, in fact, that is not the case. There is no mention of hymns in the title of Chapter 10 in the 1720 edition, which is entitled simply “Departure from School”, and is the last chapter in the first part of the *Conduite*. This seems to say clearly that Chapter 10 of the 1706 *Conduite* did not have any content at all.

But if there are ideas of La Salle that could be called his “theory” of hymns, it is enough to consider what he says in his *Règles de la Bienséance et de la civilité chrétienne*. He states there that first of all “singing is a recreation which is not only allowed but is very appropriate”. He also expresses confidence in the effects produced by singing: “Songs can move you with the spirit they contain more strongly than mere words. Further, the Saint encourages the use of spiritual songs as “a great pleasure and a genuine recreation for Christians to bless and praise God in this way in their hearts”.<sup>30</sup>

It is possible that La Salle is making allusion here to a work by Godeau writing on David’s Psalms: “These holy hymns have been translated into our language, and put to music,... everyone is able easily to sing them, to hear them sung, and to fill the spirit and the heart with the holy emotions<sup>31</sup> with which they are filled”.

## 8. CONCLUSION

La Salle saw hymns as a good medium for spiritual values. He used them as a method suitable to the purpose of the school program. Nevertheless, there was no provision for time to sing hymns in the daily life of the Brothers or in the schedule for their free day. It is possible, though, to wonder when they had a time to learn the melodies that were not well known to them. Or, maybe all the melodies were so popular that the young students were able to sing them without practice.

<sup>1</sup> *Devoirs d'un Chrétien*, CL 21, p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> *Du culte extérieur et public...*, CL 22, p. 94, 207, 225.

<sup>3</sup> Those published by Simon Pellegrin are the best known. The first edition of his *Chansons spirituelles* was published in 1701 by Le Clerc in Paris, and there were several subsequent editions. For lack of knowledge of this first edition CL 22, IV, note 2, states that none of the hymns of Pellegrin “appeared earlier than our two collections”.

<sup>4</sup> *Les Règles de la Bienséance et de la Civilité Chrétienne*, CL 19, p. 150 ff. Quotations from this work are taken from the English edition, *John Baptist de La Salle - The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, Translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC, Edited by Gregory Wright, FSC, 1990, Lasallian Publications, Romeoville, Illinois; for this article it will be indicated by RCDC; in this reference, p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> Amédée Gastoué, *Le Cantique Populaire français*, 1924, in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique*, Beauchesne, Paris, 1953, tome II, also in the *Dictionnaire général des Lettres françaises*, articles Chansons et Cantiques.

<sup>6</sup> The use of hymns in the Lasallian schools was scarcely studied up until the present time. In 1935 Brother Dante wrote an article in the *Rivista lasalliana*, III, 1 (September, pp. 20-42), entitled, *El canto nelle scuole primarie de S.G.B. de La Salle*. It was based on good research and provided much information and critical observations. However, it included statements that can no longer be considered accurate.

A second study appeared, anonymously, in the *Bulletin des Frères des Ecoles chrétiennes*, no. 129, April, 1952, pp. 102-116; even the title is misleading, *Les recueils de cantiques de saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*; that gives the impression that La Salle is the author of the hymns; in addition, the article would have to have its exaggerated rhetoric removed and especially its numerous inaccuracies eliminated, if it is to be considered worthy of consideration as a serious reference; it is better if it is simply disregarded; it does not add anything significant to the article by Brother Dante; it is full of errors.

A third article deals with the topic in the *Lasalliana*, No. 15-3-A-63 (April, 1989) and presents a summary of the research carried out on the sources of the hymns used by La Salle and their melodies.

<sup>7</sup> Gallego, Saturnino: *Vida y Pensamiento de San Juan Bautista de La Salle. II. Escritos*, BAC Madrid, 1986, p. 832. This author presumes that the first edition of the Cantiques spirituels would have been joined to the book of *Exercices de Piété*. If this is true, he would have to show how the 88 pages printed by Langlois in 1696 could have included the 120 pages of the *Cantiques spirituels*. If the hymns were added to the *Exercices*, it would be a book of 208 pages. But in that case he would have to show how two different sizes of pages (16 and 12) could be bound in the same volume; perhaps his presumption is just not tenable.

<sup>8</sup> CL 20, according to the permission to print.

<sup>9</sup> The approval was granted on March 26, 1705; see the *Registre des approbations et privilèges*, Bib. Nat., ms fr 31940, fo. 38, no. 362.

<sup>10</sup> There is an error in the numeration of this series: number XXVI on page 62 is not in its right place and is repeated on page 67; on the other hand number XXVII is omitted. Altogether there are 30 hymns.

<sup>11</sup> This series is not numbered; there are 22 hymns. The grand total is, then, 58 hymns.

<sup>12</sup> *Bibl. de l’Arsenal*, Paris, BL 10540; and BN Ye 11321. Other editions of the works of the author have also been consulted, as reprinted by Surin (edited by Robert Pepie, Paris, 1687, 436 pp.). The title of the Collection could lead to confus-

ing it with a work by Durand, which is what the anonymous author of the article in the *Bulletin* mentioned in note 6 has done.

<sup>13</sup> Bibl. de l'Arsenal, Paris, BL 10603, BL 10103; Ye 16,684. There is also *Cantiques sacrés d'un solitaire* (P.C.M. in Bibl. de l'Arsenal, 80-BL 10582, or BL 7950).

<sup>14</sup> M. d'Heauville (Louis Le Bourgeois) began publishing in 1669. The edition of 1681 is found at the Arsenal, BL 10250, BL 10766, or BL 10769. This edition has the hymn used as a prayer before the catechism lesson, "In order to be docile and wise", which was taken and shortened in the 1705 edition of the collection of the Christian Schools. From the same work Hymn V, "On the sign of a Christian", was also taken.

<sup>15</sup> More precisely, *Cantiques spirituels recueillis et mis en ordre par le commandement de Mgr de La Frézelière*, Laroche, 1696, Arsenal, 80 BL 10516.

<sup>16</sup> Arsenal, BL 10605. Many of the texts in CL 22 are found in the work edited by Nully. Some are found also in the work of La Frézelière (1696), or even in Martial de Brives (1660 or 1669). It is therefore difficult to determine precisely from which collection or from which edition the texts of the *Cantiques spirituels* have been taken.

<sup>17</sup> The third edition of *Chansons spirituelles propres pour le temps du Jubilé et utiles pour tous les autres temps* appeared in 1704 (Paris, Nicolas Leclerc). The first edition of collections 1 and 2 is dated 1701. It is from these two first collections that La Salle took the following hymns: XIV, Adore God Alone, Destroy All Other Idols"; XXI, What Treasures Enrich My Soul"; XXIV, "Divine Divine Lamb..., and in the second part of the *Cantiques spirituels*, "When the Voice of God Severe...".

<sup>18</sup> CL 22, the approbation is reproduced at the end of the Table of Contents. Further, in his edition of 1714 Pellegrin uses the same approbation.

<sup>19</sup> It is dated December 19, 1711. A similar permission to print with the same date was used to prepare an edition of *Devoirs d'un Chrétien* during the time that La Salle was at Grenoble in 1713.

<sup>20</sup> This is the approbation signed by Ellies du Pin on January 5, 1703, and reproduced in CL 22 (see note 18).

<sup>21</sup> CL 24, Chapter 10, p. 106 (2).

<sup>22</sup> CL 25, p. 100, fo 65 [26].

<sup>23</sup> CL 25, p. 99, art. 20, and p. 97, art. 11. After breakfast it is the *Laudate Dominum* that is recited. Interestingly enough, the *Manuel de Piété des Frères* kept these texts, if not the practice, up until at least 1853.

<sup>24</sup> *Lasalliana*, no 14: Catechism by Hymns, 14-A-61.

<sup>25</sup> Gastoué, Amédée, *Le Cantique populaire en France. Ses sources, son histoire*, Lyon, Janin 1924, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Antoine Godeau published Psalms set to music.

<sup>27</sup> RCDC, p. 92.

<sup>28</sup> Brother Maurice Hermans has very appropriately observed that "the majority of [the hymns] are not his own work". CL 22, IV.

<sup>29</sup> For example, there is an edition of 5,050 hymns published by M. Offray in 1744 at Avignon (Archives of Vaucluse, estate of the Brothers). In 1750 a permission was given to the Brothers for the printing of the *Cantiques spirituels* (ibid). It should be noted that the hymns printed in CL 18 (*Exercices de Piété*) are taken from the edition of 1721 (not the other way around, as indicated in the article by Brother Dante, pp. 34, 37, and 38; see note 6).

<sup>30</sup> RCDC, pp. 92, 93.

<sup>31</sup> The French word, *élanements*, can be considered as a substitute for the word *affections*; in this article it has been translated by the word *emotions*.

### Complementary Themes:

Catechism; Christian; Duties of a Christian; Marian devotion; Example-Edification.

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