

28. LOVE - CHARITY

Summary:

1. Philological details. – 2. The theological virtue of Charity. – 3. The love of God. 3.1 “Amour de Dieu”. 3.2 “Saint/divin amour”. 3.3 “Pour amour de Dieu”. 3.4 “Amour pour Dieu”. 3.5 “Pour l’amour de nous”. – 4. Love - essential for Christians.

1. PHILOLOGICAL DETAILS

If the post-modern world vision values love of oneself and love of the other, the mission of the Christian would be to give pride of place to the Love of God*. The multiple demands of this new commandment inspired the life and work of De La Salle who had made the inner journey by the age at which most people have not yet achieved maturity. It was God who linked De La Salle with the poor rather than the poor who guided him to God and in that sense it was sanctity which made him loving and not vice versa. The story of his life was the story of his love.

The formation of the Christian vocabulary at the intersection point of two cultures underwent numerous influences which refined it before particular responses were posited. In this context it is important to indicate that the Christian kerigma was proclaimed in Greek and that its religious-moral doctrine, along with the history of its origins, embraced the first two centuries.

Our journey has its starting point in Greek, moves into Latin before seeking French translations that enshrine the literary heritage of the Founder.

When the Gospels wish to synthesize what was innovative in the message of Jesus they do so

through the use of a single verb: “amar”. The history of the word was circuitous. Cicero used “caritas” as a synonym for the affection and esteem which was necessary in relations between the gods and people of authority. The word “amor”, in contrast, was used with regard to relationships of equality.¹ For example, it was used by Seneca to express the mutual affection between people who live in society. With this backdrop one can appreciate the biblical terminology. The Greek translation of the Septuagint gave prominence to the verb and from this verb emerged the use of the noun which, if it was not created by the Christians,² received a vitality from them which it previously did not possess. In biblical literature it is rare to find “amare” and “amor” because, through the influence of the Greek, a preference in usage was given to “diligere”, “dilectio” and “caritas”.

Thanks to St. Augustin the word “amor” acquired respectability in the religious language of Christians.³ The importance of the “Doctor of Charity” and his inspirational power over De La Salle accounts for its pre-eminence in his work in all concepts referring to in the widest sense. In Latin “caritas” is the most profound love, that which envelops man completely. A good number of Christians will consider “amor”, in antithesis to “caritas”, in a sense which is profane and which easily becomes negative.

The three Latin nouns “dilectio”, “caritas” and “amor” had four equivalents in the French language of the 17th century:⁴ “dilection”, “charité”,

* To facilitate greater clarity in the English translation, the author slightly adapted his original opening sentence.

“amour” and “tendresse”. In what sense and with what frequency did De La Salle use them? The verb “aimer” was the most usual and it had a variety of applications. It was more common than “amour” yet it was under “amour” that various compound-expressions, difficult to situate elsewhere, are gathered: for example “amour de Dieu”, “saint/divin amour”, “pour amour de Dieu”, “amour pour Dieu”, “pour l’amour de nous”. These expressions reflect a well-developed trend which expressed love as emanating from God, from Jesus Christ, or from the Blessed Virgin, and a person’s response to this divine choice takes an expression from the multicoloured tapestry through which the lives of the saints are expressed.

On the level of interpersonal relationships the love of the poor has a clarity all of its own. De La Salle reserves the use of “amour pour les pauvres” to indicate the feelings of compassion towards the underprivileged. In De La Salle’s time “amour” was always masculine in reference to the love of God while, elsewhere, it was used in both genders with a preference for the feminine. In his usage De La Salle followed the tendency in vogue at the end of the 17th century, ratified by the Academy in 1718, that “amour” was always masculine.⁵

The scarcity of quotations on this theme in the R lends weight to the idea, elsewhere demonstrated, that these texts represent a patchwork of expressions which the Founder drew from different sources and used for his Brothers. On the other hand the brevity of the MR, along with its clearly defined character, justified a rather marginal treatment of the theme in this work.

“Charité”, in its fullest sense, harmonizes the double sense of love of God and love of man.

The word “dilection” dates back to the 12th century. Contrary to what happened with the Latin word it appears to have been used infrequently. Its use could be considered to be the preserve of a select group of preachers who gradually abandoned it. For example, St. Francis de Sales used it, although not without reluctance to judge from his assertion that, “among Latin speakers, it is inferior to love”. The dictionaries of the time restrict its use to apostolic writings. Such factors would appear to justify the lack of references to “dilection” in the Founder’s written works.

“Tendresse”, combining a sense of love and friendship, is derived from the adjective “tendre”. Until the 17th century its use was rare. It does not appear in Dc, R, or Em although it does have a position of some significance in 1, without being striking, and to a lesser extent in MF, MD, MR and Da. Normally De La Salle applied it to God or to Jesus Christ as the subject while the eucharistic context also emerges explicitly on various occasions. His conception of the educator as “minister of God and ambassador of Jesus Christ” impelled him to use it in a ministerial sense and with reference to one’s neighbour. In the plural it is equivalent to particular expressions of affection. Each time that De La Salle uses it he applies it to a distinct subject, for example, to God, to the Blessed Virgin, or to the human heart. When the adjective; is linked with “amour” it reveals an emotional state of obvious intensity. He also uses it with reference to the relationship of Jesus Christ towards man and to the reciprocal relationship between man and Jesus Christ.

2. THE THEOLOGICAL VIRTUE OF CHARITY

As a theological virtue it embraces the twin dimensions of love of God and love of one’s neighbour. After a circuitous journey this meaning acquired common currency in the French language. In the Lasallian vocabulary it emerges with relative frequency in MF, in MD and in DA. The MR, with six quotations, and the R with four, are the works which contain least references. They frequently repeat biblical quotations and, with one exception (MR 201,2), they employ the equation = caritas = charité. The word-order here offers an unsuspected shade of meaning - i.e. from the love of Jesus Christ to good works in favour of those who have been abandoned.

A striking feature with regard to this theme is the fact that eight of the ten quotations on the love of the Word Incarnate are found in the last work of De La Salle (EM). It could be an indication of the intellectual development of the author who, rather than comment on the rich doctrine of the mystery, indicates it as a sentiment which enlivens mental prayer. A large percentage of quo-

tations indicate charity as the essential virtue for the Christian and on two occasions he metaphorically describes it as "golden". Besides obedience, charity is the virtue which should be most outstanding in every religious community.

It also has implications for the mission of the Brother since the ministry of education involves responsibilities. On a couple of occasions the Founder cannot resist the temptation to embellish as, for example, when he includes the word in the compound expression "charity and zeal".

With regard to the love of one's neighbour he wished that there should not be the least diminution in its application. The spirit of his foundation was renewed through those texts in which it found itself involved in charity towards the poor. Moreover, for De La Salle, the scope of charity was widened to include the souls in purgatory.

Under Tertulian's influence "caritas" underwent a semantic evolution in which good works or the giving of alms specifically signified nothing other than a manifestation of love. This shade of meaning was to have an extraordinary application in written Lasallian work.

The Founder makes only a marginal use of the expression "esprit de charité" while very occasionally he links "charity and the love of God". The "charity of God" as an expression of our love for God or of God's love for us had fallen into disuse by this time.

3. THE LOVE OF GOD

Love comes from God or from Jesus Christ and on many occasions the love of Jesus will be centred around the Eucharist. At times it is also used to express the sublimity of Mary. The ultimate perfection of the circle is expressed when man responds to the divine choice. There is a movement in which rational creatures express a hymn of praise to the Universal Creator. Outstanding among all the texts is that which celebrates the holiness of the sinner (Lk 7,47). While there existed the common doctrine that prayer, alms-giving and penitence expiated faults, in this text for the first time Jesus attributes the purification of the soul to the fire of charity and such an application could not but make an impression on

De La Salle. Hence, for example, the meditation which he dedicated to St. Mary Magdalen exudes the theme of charity.

On the level of interpersonal relationships there are a dozen texts which stress love due to the poor.

The verb "aimer" is almost exclusively applied to the love of God - i.e. to the fact of God's love and to its expression.

3.1. "Amour de Dieu"

In the Lasallian vocabulary this expression is equivalent to the life of grace, the source of justice, the driving force of perfect contrition, the best of all good things. It is necessary that parents educate their children in the love and the fear of God, the latter being a consequence of God's love. To acquire and preserve this "amour de Dieu" it is necessary to go to prayer, remaining attentively before Our Lord and taking the Blessed Virgin, who died with perfect love of God, as a reference point.

3.2. "Saint/divin amour"

Union with God is achieved according to De La Salle through "holy" love. It is of such importance that one must ask for the grace to be impregnated with it at every moment. One must not allow even a single moment of the day to escape this beneficial influence which seals the life and death of the Christian.

Through the course of life one will have to suffer and put up with many difficulties which will arise. Hence, one needs to fill one's heart with this "holy love" so that all actions emanate from this source. An astonishing recapitulative synthesis is offered in his comment on the feast of St. Charles Borromeo: "...with the exception of your divine love and the salvation of souls, I am indifferent to everything else..." (MF 187,1).

3.3. "Pour amour de Dieu"

To be a Christian means to live, work, suffer and die as a person who follows Christ in the modern world. De La Salle embellished this thought with a multitude of commentaries which

are gathered around this fourfold axis. The just live with joy emanating from the love of God. In their journey through life they have to perform all their actions and good works for the love of God. These are affirmations which completely embrace the Brother's existence and that of any disciple of Jesus.

The dimension of suffering is heavily accentuated by De La Salle to embrace things which are arduous — hardships, injuries, poverty — in fact all the troubles of spirit and of body, including martyrdom. The paradigm for this radical exigency is none other than Jesus himself who lived humiliated in this world, experiencing all sorts of insults and suffering daily. It demands a radicalism which finds different expressions such as mortification, depriving oneself of some pleasure, the moderation of the senses, or the renunciation of all sentiments of greed.

3.4. "Amour pour Dieu"

It is perhaps one of the most splendid Lasallian epigraphs. Its conception and development can be traced in VL. The Founder starts with the idea of investing all love in the love and service of God. It is essential that the love which one has for God is not kept locked within oneself. Thus one is forced to give witness before God of the love that one has for him, preferring him to anything which might be the object of one's love to such a degree that God reigns in one's heart through grace and through the fullness of his love. This gives rise to the desire to die for God, evoking the Gospel text: "He who wants to save his life will lose it and he who loses his life will save it" (Mt 10,39).

3.5. "Pour l'amour de nous"

The origin of love has to be located in God. While what God does in love is attributed to the Holy Spirit, this love was of such proportions for De La Salle that it led him to highlight the figure of Jesus Christ who, for love of us, lacked everything in life, suffered excessively and was prepared to be crucified and given over to death. Beyond his earthly life he has manifested his love for us in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

4. LOVE - ESSENTIAL FOR ALL CHRISTIANS

Love is a universal and trivialized theme which, it appears, is understood by all, by philosophers, writers, artists etc. Nobody experiences the necessity to define it. Nor did De La Salle demonstrate any particular insight in explaining a word that his contemporaries understood. He was silent on the ontology of love and even more so on its psychology. What method did he use to convey his thoughts on this theme? His starting point was affected by the post-Tridentine controversy with regard to faith and works (Da 89-90, R 155) and this led him to emphasize the efficacy of the one who performs the action.

As its object, love has the whole range of virtues and qualities of the spirit: from the love of truth to the love of prayer, through fasting, penitence, mortification and suffering. It is qualified as "ardent" with reference to God and to assert that, as such, it is stronger than death. We truly love someone when we actively "feel" with them. If we love God, and if God in his creative action reflects his own glory, it is necessary too that we try to glorify him. In glorifying God by our prayers and actions our own salvation is assured.

Love is "tender" in its projection towards man, whether it be the love of God the Father or that of Jesus Christ directed towards sinners. This availability of love explains the importance of serving God, of the openness of the soul to inspirations, of holy abandonment and of adoration.

If grace had not created a community of life between God and man, love would have been reduced to a respectful adoration from which one's neighbour would have been separated because worship would then have been reserved for God. The additional ministerial dimension of charity can only be understood through the new relation emanating from created grace. This enables the Christian to love his neighbour with the same love that God loves both the Christian and his neighbour.

On three occasions the Founder alludes to "pure love", in contrast to "interested love", where the object of love is God himself. Considered in its ontological sense such a love involves happiness since, in wanting God in love, the will

desires its own good which is God himself. The Bérullian School was an outstanding exponent of this concept. Bérulle, the apostle of the Word Incarnate, highlighted above all the reciprocal nature of divine love, the effect of which is to unite the Word with mankind and vice versa. Since the nature of love is to unite oneself with the person being loved, one must forget oneself so that one can belong totally to Jesus. Such was the love of Mary Magdalen for Jesus (MF 144,1).

Although he is usually so resolved in his expressions, the Founder occasionally employs specific symbols and metaphors about love. Outstanding among these is the fire of God's love which cannot exist in man without the previous destruction of sin. In passing he also alludes to a "hair" which is capable of diminishing the love of the Spouse while other references are to the crown of love, to the yoke of love and peace and to a

ring as a sign of love between spouses.

¹ PETRE H.: *Caritas, Etude sur le vocabulaire latin de la charité chrétienne*, Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, Louvain 1948, p. 32; LEVIS AND SHORT: *A Latin dictionary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1958, pp. 108-109.

² WITT R.E.: *The use of ΑΓΑΠΗ in P. OXY, 1380; A reply*, *The journal of Theological studies* 19, 1969, p. 211; NYGREN A.: *Erôs et Agapé. La notion chrétienne de l'amour et ses transformations*, Aubier, Paris 1944, pp. 158-162; POZO C.: *Teología de la fe*, Grenade 1966, p. 99.

³ PETRE, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-96; WILMART A.: *Un sermon de St. Augustin sur le Précepte de la Charité*, RAM 2, 1921, 351-372.

⁴ Cf. FURETIÈRE A.: *Dictionnaire Universel*, Arnoud et Reinier Leers, La Haya-Rotterdam 1701; RICHELET P.: *Nouveau Dictionnaire François*; Jean Elsevir, Amsterdam 1709; MONET P.: *Invantaire des deus langues françoise et latine*, veuve de Claude Rigaud et Philippe Borde, Lyon 1636; LITRE E.: *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, Hachette, Paris 1885; CAYROU G.: *Le français classique. Lexique de la langue du dix-septième siècle*, Didier, Paris 1948.

⁵ Cf. CAYROU G., *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.

Complementary Themes:

Abandonment; Adoration; Attention; Tenderness; Heart; Disciples of Jesus Christ; Holy Spirit; Grace; Inspirations; Jesus Christ; The Eucharist; Mystery; Prayer, Poverty; Suffering; Truth; Virgin Mary.

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