

31. SPIRIT OF THE WORLD

Summary:

1. Two opposed wisdoms. – 2. The fight against the spirit of the World. – 3. Following Jesus versus the spirit of the world. – 4. Keeping what is essential in focus. – 5. Conclusion.

Elsewhere in this work the meaning of “world” and “relation to the world” according to the thought of La Salle has been defined. “Spirit of the world” is limited to the consideration of the interior attitude of a person, the “spirit” or “mentality” or the summation of a person’s values.

1. TWO OPPOSED WISDOMS

The spirit of the world is a spirit that is opposed to the Spirit of Jesus Christ and to his teachings in the Gospel. The spirit of the world is the wisdom, or the philosophy of those people of the world who are the enemies of the cross of Jesus Christ. “The wisdom of God is clean opposed to the wisdom of the world... which is a cloak for sin”.¹ The wisdom of the world is regarded as folly in the eyes of God, the wisdom of God is seen as folly by the people of the world, in the sense in which holy Scripture used the word “world”.

2. THE FIGHT AGAINST THE SPIRIT OF THE WORLD

It is necessary to fight this pervading spirit which can destroy in us the spirit of Jesus Christ. According to La Salle it is necessary to prevent the

spirit of the world from taking hold of us: “do nothing to please the people of the world”.² “The practices and the attitudes of the people of the world are completely contrary to those that you must have”.³ It is in this same sense that Saint Paul recommends, “do not be conformed to this world” (Rom. 12,2).

The Saint exhorts his Brothers to reject anything that risks putting them in opposition to the spirit of Jesus Christ. “...if you are truly for God you are the enemy of the world and it is your enemy because it is the enemy of God; treat it then as such”.⁴ The spirit of people of the world, partisans of this age, is empty of God, “they have only a very imperfect knowledge of God; for this reason they do not think of God, they do not speak of God, they do not want to hear about God, and they rarely pray to God”.⁵ “They have no desires except for what pleases their senses”.⁶ La Salle follows his teacher, Tronson, when he writes, “Whoever is attached to the world and its things is not open to the Spirit of God who communicates himself only to those whom he finds empty of what is not God; the world cannot receive this Divine Spirit because it loves only the concupiscence of the flesh, the concupiscence of the eyes, and the pride of life.”⁷

To refer to the same realities La Salle will speak of the false joys of the world,⁸ the pleas-

ures,⁹ the vanity.¹⁰ He recommends that we do not let riches or creatures share our heart.¹¹ It is necessary to understand that to “despise” the world, the things of the world, riches, and honors, means to give them a lesser value in our heart than we give to God.¹²

3. FOLLOWING JESUS VERSUS THE SPIRIT OF THE WORLD

La Salle challenges those religious who have not given up the spirit of the world and who show this in their behavior: “they like to be in the company of the people of the world, to converse with them, learn the latest news from them, and become involved with them; they want to have the style and material of their clothing, to behave like them, ...to affect the air of I can’t imagine what worldly sophistication. ...all of which behavior is totally unbecoming of persons who have consecrated themselves to God”.¹³

This is how the spirit of the world is able to compromise the following of Jesus. For when La Salle spells out the ways in which certain actions reveal a persistent spirit of the world, he does not lose sight of the fact that relationship with Jesus Christ and fidelity to his teaching is essential. It is to protect this relationship that La Salle warns against attachment to the world, its spirit and its maxims — whatever it may be that allures to actions that are not at all conformable to the life of a disciple of Jesus.

This is where the spirit of faith, and the action of the Holy Spirit are the best antidotes to the spirit of the world. To the degree that the spirit of the world is present, in that same degree the spirit of faith and the action of the Holy Spirit disappear.

4. KEEPING WHAT IS ESSENTIAL IN FOCUS

There is a risk of emphasizing what is secondary if too much attention is paid to the letter of La Salle’s writing without keeping in mind that the essential is the quality of relationship with Christ and fidelity to follow him in the religious and Christian life.

Michel Sauvage gives a warning that “the negative language of La Salle” regarding the world and [its spirit] “can result in missing the fact of La Salle’s existential consciousness of the absolute transcendence of God ... his giving of himself totally to God and to his service, his walking in God’s presence and his journeying towards him without allowing himself to be preoccupied, tied up, or usurped by “creatures”.¹⁴

5. CONCLUSION

These are the principal elements in the teaching of La Salle on the spirit of the world. The expression “contempt for the world” reveals an attitude of mind, but it must be seen within the context of the double meaning of the “word”. What has been written in this article, therefore, must be completed by reading what has been written in the article on that word.

¹ CL 13 p. 13.

² CL 12, MD p. 225.

³ *Ib.* The practices and views that Christians ought to have in order to follow Jesus, are his maxims. See MD pp. 131-132, 169, 181-182, 225, 235, MF p. 64.

⁴ *Ib.*, p. 125.

⁵ *Ib.*, pp. 125-126.

⁶ *Ib.*

⁷ *Ib.*, MD p. 126. In the same sense Tronson speaks of the ecclesiastical spirit “incompatible with the spirit of the world which is “the love of riches, of honors and of richnesses” (*Examen particuliers*, first part, 4th examen). Tronson is referring to 1 Cor. 2, 12: “We have not received the spirit of this world, but the spirit that comes from God”. La Salle makes explicit allusion to 1 Jn 2, 15, 16: “Do not love the world or what is in the world ... for all that is in the world is the concupiscence of the flesh, concupiscence of the eyes, and the pride of life, which comes not from God, but from the world”.

⁸ “Look with horror (disgust) on balls, dances, the spectacles and the vain and frivolous joys that provide the distractions of the world, such as mascarades...” CL 22, p. 74.

⁹ “How many times has it not happened that I gave myself to the excitement of my heart at the eternal loss of my soul... just to enjoy some vile, shameful, and brief pleasure, foolish honor, passing satisfaction...” (EM p. 116)

¹⁰ La Salle considers that a benefit of the spiritual resurrection shared in that of Jesus, is the ability to “despise the vanities and the pleasures of the world, ... to flee from the company of persons who are living according to the world, and to associate gladly with persons of piety [i.e., those living according to the maxims of Christ]” (CL 22, p. 173).

¹¹ With moral realism La Salle declares, “It is certainly al-

lowed to love creatures and things in the world, but we ought to love them in relation to God, and this is no longer to love the creature, but God in the creature" (CL 20, p. 94). Such a statement makes very clear and free the thought of La Salle on the world.

¹² CL 20, pp. 96-97, EM, p. 87.

¹³ CL 12, MD, p. 229-230.

¹⁴ SAUVAGE Michel et CAMPOS Miguel, *Jean-Baptiste de La Salle — Annoncer l'Evangile aux Pauvres*, Paris, Beauchesne 1976, pp. 178-179.

Complementary Themes:

Christian; Spirit of Christianity; World.

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