

39. INCARNATION

Summary:

1. The meaning of the word. 1.1. In the time of the Founder. 1.2. Today. – 2. The socio-historical and ecclesial context. – 3. The mystery of the Incarnation in the writings of the Founder. 3.1. Catechetical writings. 3.2. Spiritual writings. 3.2.1. *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer*. 3.2.2. *Meditations*. – 4. The mystery of the Incarnation in the life of the Founder. – 5. Practical applications for today.

1. THE MEANING OF THE WORD

1.1. In the time of the Founder

According to the French Language Dictionary of the 17th Century, the fundamental meaning of the term incarnation is the “union of the Son of God with his human nature, a mystery whereby the eternal Word became man for our redemption”.¹

In an age that put great stress on the grandeur of God, the mystery of the Incarnation was approached from God's side. Without denying its redemptive purpose, the important element in the Incarnation was considered to be the self-emptying of God, the fact that he had taken on human flesh and become one of us. This was a distinguishing mark of Sulpician spirituality, and especially of Bérulle, as will be seen later on. It was said that the self-emptying of God is as incomprehensible a mystery as the mystery of the Trinity itself.²

From another point of view, the principal reason for the Incarnation is said to be “in order to satisfy divine justice and to redeem human beings”.³

1.2. In the present historical moment

The evolution of the spirituality of the Incarnation has progressed from an almost exclusive emphasis on its transcendental aspect to its immanent significance. From this point of view, the Incarnation is an affirmation of the value of the material reality that the Son of God willingly assumed. By the very fact that the Word became flesh, the material world is a sacrament of the presence of the Word. Christianity, therefore, has the responsibility to affirm the divine potential enfolded within the material universe. The Incarnation is not only a mystery to be contemplated; it is a dynamic force that commits us to the building up of the world and to the betterment of the human person and society in the world.⁴

Gaudium et spes of Vatican II recalls and admirably summarizes this evolution of incarnational spirituality. On the one hand nothing human can be merely neutral for us (GS 1); on the other hand, the mystery of being human can only be understood in the light of the eternal Word: “In him, human nature was assumed, not suppressed. By the same token, the humanity we possess has been elevated to a sublime dignity” (GS 22).

2. THE SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECCLESIAL CONTEXT

In his understanding of the mystery and the spirituality of the Incarnation, John Baptist de La Salle is indebted in a particular way to the 17th century French school of spirituality. Bérulle, who founded the school, wanting to work for the reform of the clergy, founded the first French Oratory designed for the sanctification of its members.

Bérulle was a prolific writer and his works were published in 1644. His spiritual vision was taken up by Charles Condren, who succeeded him as the superior of the Oratory. It was through Condren that Olier encountered Bérullian spirituality. He gave it a stamp of his own and passed it on to his followers in the Seminary he founded at Saint Sulpice, where De La Salle would be trained in the tradition.

The cornerstone of this spirituality is the grandeur and majesty of God who is worthy of all reverence. We, in turn, render homage and adoration through Jesus Christ, with whom we ought always to remain united. For that reason this is a Christocentric spirituality. The epitome of this doctrine is to adore God in Jesus Christ and through Jesus Christ. Bérulle focused his doctrine on the mystery of the Incarnation, with Christ in his twofold nature as God and man at the center of it all. Pope Urban VII described Bérulle as “the apostle of the Word incarnate,” an expression we find often in the writings of the De La Salle (Da 25, 467; Db 34; Dc 199; EM 91; GA 326; MF 130, 131).

Bérulle can be considered as a spiritual Copernicus: “Jesus is the true sun around which the whole world, as well as our own hearts, take part in a movement with Christ at its center.”

The part of the teaching of Bérulle that De La Salle will make his own more than any other is the perennial character of the mysteries of Jesus Christ. We ought to participate in the spirit of these mysteries, whose effect is always present to us.

Our task is to give the mysteries of Jesus their full meaning. This applies, of course, to the mystery of the Incarnation, which we ought to perpetuate and to make ever-present. We shall see later how De La Salle applied this teaching.

With Saint Augustine, Bérulle envisioned the mystery of the Incarnation as a mystery of humility. The raising up of our humanity supposes the self-emptying of the Word. “We adore an infinite God who has become finite and limited within the confines of a human nature. We adore an eternal God who has become mortal; an invisible God who has become visible; an impassible God who has become subject to heat and cold, to the cross and to death; a God completely indivisible composed of elements; in a word, a Creator who has become a creature”.⁵

3. THE MEANING OF INCARNATION IN THE WRITINGS OF THE FOUNDER

For practical reasons the writings of the Founder will be treated in two sections: those intended for catechetical use and those of a more spiritual nature.

3.1. **Catechetical writings.** There are abundant references in these writings to the mystery of the Incarnation. In the several volumes of the *Duties of a Christian* they tend to be repetitious.

3.1.1. In the *Daily Exercise of Piety for the Christian Schools* the Founder summarizes his own faith and the faith that he wants the Brothers to pass on to their students in a beautiful prayer. This prayer was to be said at regular intervals every Wednesday: “My Savior, Jesus Christ, I firmly believe that you are the only Son of God the Father, that you became man for the love of us, and that you assumed a body and a soul like ours in the womb of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, your mother. In this belief I adore and worship you with all my heart” (E 20).

3.1.2. In the *Instructions and Prayers* the Founder likes to repeat frequently the Bérullian expression relating the “Incarnate Word” to the mystery of the Eucharist (I 96, 263, 265, 269).

3.1.3. In the same kind of prayer, the Founder highlights the Ave Maria as the principal Marian prayer because it recalls to our minds the mystery of the Incarnation (Da 468). He notes that the

same mystery is also found in the Apostles' Creed (Db 21).

3.1.4. Another way the Founder recommends us to honor this mystery is to make frequent acts of faith in it and to recite the Angelus three times every day (Dc 138).

3.1.5. The celebration of the feast of the Incarnation ought to be special in every way. This is one of the major feasts of the Church and is celebrated in connection with the Annunciation. To celebrate it fittingly, we should:

“* On this holy day, adore frequently the Son of God incarnate in the womb of the Most Blessed Virgin.

* Honor as we ought the Most Holy Virgin as the Mother of God since she became such on this day.

* Thank God for the grace he has given to his people and the love he has shown to us by sending his own Son to turn us away from sin.

* Ask the Holy Spirit for a share in the graces with which Jesus Christ was endowed at the moment of his conception with a view to communicating them to all people.

* Ask Jesus Christ, through the intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin, an interior and an exterior purity, as well as the profound humility that will dispose us to receive him worthily in Holy Communion” (Dc 137).

3.1.6. For the catechetical instruction of the pupils, the Founder presents the mystery of the Incarnation in question and answer form, from which we can extract some of the more important ideas. The purpose of the Incarnation is seen as the desire on God's part to free his people from the state of sin into which they had fallen. For this purpose, the Son of God became man, taking on a human soul and body like ours. The Son of God made man is called Our Lord Jesus Christ or the Word Incarnate. He is one person in two natures, divine and human, totally human in everything except sin, the inclination to sin, and ignorance.

He was conceived by the Most Blessed Virgin through the work of the Holy Spirit. This action is attributed to the Holy Spirit because it was through love that God gave us his Son. The works

of love are proper to the Holy Spirit, although inseparable from the action of the other persons of the Trinity.

The precise meaning for the Founder of the word incarnation is the union of the body and soul of Jesus Christ to the person of the Son of God.

Finally, the Founder refers to the liturgical feast of this mystery on March 25. The feast is called the Annunciation because of the announcement of the Angel to Mary that she would conceive a son who would be the Son of God (Db 34-37; GA 325-326, 430-440).

3.2. **Spiritual writings.** We shall examine first the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer* and then the *Meditations*.

3.2.1. *The method of Mental Prayer.* It is important to recall de La Salle's teaching on the mysteries, derived from the French school of spirituality. The mysteries are more than a recollection of past events. Not only should they be contemplated, but also lived and proclaimed.⁶ It is in this perspective that we must read what the Founder tells us about the spirit of the mystery of the Incarnation. He alludes to meditation on this mystery in the second part of the *Method*.

“The spirit of the mystery of the Incarnation is charity. Our Lord tells us that it was through charity and love that the Eternal Father gave to us his only Son, that the Son himself became incarnate, and that this mystery was accomplished through the Holy Spirit. The spirit of this mystery is also humility. As Saint Paul says, the Son of God emptied himself by taking the form of a slave” (EM 60).

Notice that the Founder contemplates this mystery from a Trinitarian perspective and that he sees the mystery as rooted in charity. It is only God's love for humans that explains his self-emptying. Humility is thus the consequence of love.

Similar to what was found earlier in the catechetical texts, the Founder says that the principal reason for the mystery of the Incarnation is the redemption of humans and their liberation from sin. “Would I ever dare, my Lord and my God, to commit sin again, realizing, as Saint John says in Chapter 3 of his first Epistle, that you manifested yourself to us to remove sin from our midst and

so to destroy the works of the devil, namely, our sins.”⁷

The act of faith the Founder proposes for the mystery of the Nativity refers in fact more to the Incarnation. It expresses the profound admiration that De La Salle felt in the presence of this mystery: “My Lord Jesus Christ, I firmly believe that you, the only Son of God the Father Almighty and eternally God with him, have deigned to become man and to clothe yourself in our flesh by taking on a body and a soul like ours in the womb of the most pure Virgin through the operation of the Holy Spirit; that you were born a tiny infant without ceasing to be God” (CL 50, 191).

Through his Incarnation, Jesus Christ has merited for us a twofold grace that the Founder never ceases to emphasize: we are sons of God and also brothers of Jesus Christ. “Oh infinite charity of the eternal Son of God! Because you are willing to be the Son of Man you have made yourself my brother” (CL 50, 65); and again, “You have merited for me the grace to be a son of God, your Father” (DL 50: 64, 65, 84, 86).⁸

In the face of such gifts, De La Salle gives full vent to the sentiments of his heart: “What an immense happiness! What a prodigy! My dignity and my worth surpass everything in the whole universe! For all eternity I can be the son of God and the brother of God! What a great honor! What an advantage and what a blessing! My soul, would you ever have thought such a thing possible?” (CL 50, 65).⁹

That is why, De La Salle tells us, when we contemplate the Nativity or the Incarnation, we ought to assume the attitude of a new-born child, to make ourselves as little children before God, to abandon ourselves totally into his hands. “Grant me, O Lord, your spirit of sonship that gives me the confidence to address God, in union with you, as Abba, Father!” (CL 50, 232).

3.2.2. *The Meditations.* If we look for merely literal and material references to the Incarnation in De La Salle’s meditations, we do not find very many and some of them are rather superficial. Thus the Angel who announces the mystery of the Incarnation tells the Virgin that Jesus is the name she should give the child (MF 93, 2). Again, it is through Saints Joachim and Anne that the mys-

tery of the Incarnation will have its beginning (MF 146, 2 and 163, 1); or that it was Saint Leo who defined for the whole Church its faith in the mystery of the Incarnation (MF 114, 2).

There are two additional allusions which relate Mary to the mystery of the Incarnation in which the Founder uses two of the most beautiful of her titles, “Tabernacle of the Word” and “Mother of the Word Incarnate” (MF 163, 1).

The situation is quite different, however, if we look for references to the “spirit of the mystery of the Incarnation.” Here we discover much that is rich, especially in reference to Christian education. As Michel Sauvage has well put it, “Through the medium of the Brothers as educator, as for everyone who is sent” by the Church, the mystery of the Incarnation is prolonged in time; in manner adapted to the nature of each one, salvation is made available to others; by sending the Brother and entrusting him with a mission “in a real and mysterious way the Church continues in him, as its minister, the mystery of the Incarnation” (Rétif).¹⁰

Such is the teaching of the Founder that one can pick out from any number of his meditations.¹¹ The Brother is “minister,” “ambassador,” “representative” of Jesus Christ and called as such to prolong in history Christ’s redemptive incarnation. “It is Jesus Christ himself who desires that your disciples see you as if they were looking at him, and that they receive your instruction as if he were giving them himself” (MR 195, 2).

The Brother should incarnate himself in the world of the poor in order to lead them to God. He does this by manifesting to them the gratuitous love God has for them in such a way as to transform their lives. “The Son of God has come down to earth in order to make us sharers in his nature and so to change us totally into heavenly persons” (MF 82, 2). The Founder expresses the same idea with greater force in the meditation for Christmas: “In choosing our state in life, we ought to be resolved to live in a lowly condition as did the Son of God when he became man. That is what is most characteristic of our profession and our employment. We are poor Brothers forgotten and little thought of by people of the world. It is only the poor that come to seek us out” (MF 96, 2). The Brother ought to be for his pupils the sacrament of the gratuitous love God has for them. “You

must imitate God himself to some extent, for he so loved the souls he created that when he saw them involved in sin and unable to redeem themselves, his zeal and desire for their salvation led him to send his own Son to rescue them from their miserable condition... Ought you not, therefore, to do the same for them through your ministry" (MR 201, 3). This applies especially to the poorest among them with whom the Brother ought to identify himself in a process of incarnation and kenosis. "Since you have been granted the good fortune to be engaged in religious instruction, especially of the poor, you should, in the spirit of your Institute, have much greater concern for them than for the rich. You should, besides, live as poor men, detached from everything in order to be more like them in every way" (MF 143, 2).

The Brother ought to imitate the love of the Father who gave up his Son, and the love of the Son who gave himself up for his people. This the Brother should do by cultivating an attitude of profound humility. Incarnation means to adapt oneself and abase oneself to the level of the little ones. "The more they become like little children... the more will they move the hearts of their pupils" (MD 72, 2; Cf. MD 66, 2; MR 193, 3; 197, 1-2).

In the *Method of Mental Prayer*, charity and humility express the spirit of the mystery of the Incarnation; in the *Meditations* it is in the ministry of Christian education that these expressions of charity and humility become apparent, are lived, and take on bodily form.

4. THE MYSTERY OF THE INCARNATION IN THE LIFE OF THE FOUNDER

It is often said that we should read the writings of the Founder, especially his spiritual writings, as a form of autobiography. Many of the ideas and expressions in the *Method of Mental Prayer* and the *Meditations* reflect his experience in the process of incarnating himself into the world of the teachers and the poor. We shall try to deal with some of these aspects in greater depth.

With Michel Sauvage, we can interpret De La Salle's process of incarnation as a personal journey of renunciation: of his family, his social status, and his functions as a canon. It was a journey that

took place in history: From one commitment to another the Lord led De La Salle and his disciples to assume completely the mission of the Son of Man. Through the service of poor and abandoned youth, the Founder participated in Christ's incarnation among the poor, and in his obedience to the Father.

Of special significance is the incarnation of the Founder into the world of the schoolteachers, men who in the beginning he considered "inferior to his valet." Little by little they would constitute themselves into a community. We can consider the Brothers as the first among the poor with whom the Founder was incarnated as he became one with them in their lives and in their weaknesses.¹² "It was very difficult for him to leave his comfortable world to incarnate himself in the midst of these ordinary men. It was equally difficult, as the biographers point out, for him to embrace a new lifestyle in things such as food, lodging, and the level of conversation.»¹³

No less exemplary is De La Salle's incarnation into the world of the poor. In sharing his history with them, he had to free them from their alienated situation, to give them hope and freedom, to announce to them the saving message of Jesus, but always from within. "The decisive option in favor of the poor, the living faith that the poor are indeed blessed, these were at the center of De La Salle's thinking and were the motivating force in his life and in all of his struggles. There is no doubt that in all of this he was giving witness to the Spirit who led him to understand in a concrete way the mystery of the saving incarnation of Jesus Christ."¹⁴

The personal journey of the Founder was an incarnational journey. His fidelity to God presupposed his fidelity to persons. "His original journey of seeking out the will of God converted him progressively to a journey with others, among whom he incarnated himself. He took it upon himself to meet their needs which he perceived as a call: to strengthen the teachers, to establish the schools, to see that they functioned well, to put at the disposal of poor children the benefits of schooling, and to educate them in a Christian manner, disposing them, in a practical way and in their world, to the saving inbreak of the good news of salvation."¹⁵

5. PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

Out of the richness in De La Salle's teaching on the Incarnation, we can draw a few applications for our lives in today's world.

5.1. In reference to what we could call the Founder's "theology of the mysteries" and applying that to the mystery of the Incarnation, we discover an invitation to contemplate the mystery in silence and prayer in order to announce it and live it as the heart of our educational ministry. We live it and announce it out of a boundless charity, such as Jesus had in his Incarnation, and with a profound humility that leads us to identify with and to share the lot of young people and the poor.

5.2. Lasallian spirituality is an incarnational spirituality that unites body and soul, the sacred and the profane, the school and prayer, liberation and contemplation, human progress and evangelization. It is a spirituality that belongs in the real world the Founder "became aware" (1987 Rule 1), which makes an impression (the Founder "deeply moved" Rule 11), with the Word of God illuminating that real world ("by God's grace" Rule 1), in the light of faith (Rule 11).

5.3. In order to be faithful today to the myst-

ery of the Incarnation, it is necessary to undergo a process of "inculturation," which brings us ever closer to the world of the poor and the young. In Latin America it is an invitation to a style of religious life more closely "inserted" into the life of the common people. We cannot forget the axiom that only that which has been taken on can be saved. The incarnational journey of the Founder is a model for our own. Because the Word became flesh, religious life is called to become a life with the common people, the Lasallian school a school for the common people.

¹ Dictionnaire de la Langue Française du XVII^e Siècle. T. 3, p. 922.

² Idem, p. 923.

³ Idem, p. 923.

⁴ *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, T, VII 2, pp. 1639-1640.

⁵ OP 16, 770.

⁶ Cf. Sauvage-Campos in CL 50, pp. 385-390; L. DIUMENGE, *L'amour dans la doctrine spirituelle de SJBS* (Salamanca: Sinite, Tejares 1971), pp. 153-157.

⁷ DIUMENGE, L, op.cit., p. 159.

⁸ Idem, p. 162.

⁹ Idem, p. 163.

¹⁰ M. SAUVAGE, *Catéchèse et laïcité*, p. 831.

¹¹ M. Sauvage and M. Campos, *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, 1981, p. 116-117.

¹² Idem, p. 178.

¹³ Idem, p. 190.

¹⁴ Idem, p. 127.

¹⁵ M. Campos, *Itinerario evangélico de S.J.B.S.* (Madrid: Ed. Bruño 1980), p. 117.

Complementary themes:

Charity, Community, Contemplation, Eucharist, God, Humility, Mass, Mystery, Poverty, Redemption, School, Trinity, Virgin Mary, Word.

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