

41. JOY

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1. WAS JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE A SAD SAINT?

The progress made in the last few decades in lasallian studies¹ gives of the Holy founder a picture which brings out the human side of his character. Although he owed a lot to the influence exercised on him by the masters of the French school of spirituality² whilst he was at the same time strongly influenced by his family environment, profoundly Christian, rather austere with no doubt a hint of rigorism, it is easy, from his writings, to answer the question his biographers asked themselves: was he a sad saint?³ This school of spirituality has sometimes been blamed for its pessimism but it must be understood in the context of what were the great characteristics of this school and the times impregnated with the doctrines of St. Augustine and often with rigorism.

In the present article, we shall see the place St. John Baptist de La Salle gave to JOY in his writings, whether these were meant for the pupils or for their teachers. We shall describe it in the Christian, in the Religious, in the Christian teacher and in the lasallian school. In our conclusion, we shall examine how he expressed it in his life and in his relationship with his Brothers.

2. LEXICOGRAPHY

2.1. Joy and related sentiments in the vocabulary of the 17th century

The Founder does not define JOY nor other related words used here. Trevoux says that joy is “an emotion of the soul, a pleasant and lively movement that the soul feels when it possesses a real or imaginary good”. It differs from CONTENTMENT which is an interior feeling of the heart, whilst it refers to an exterior manifestation; it is an expression of the heart which sometimes stirs the mind. SATISFACTION on the other hand concerns passions. PLEASURE is principally related to the taste, just as the word DELIGHT. Joy and gaiety are synonymous but joy is in the heart, gaiety in manners. The former consists in a sweet sentiment of the soul; the latter in a pleasant state of the mind which manifests itself in the eyes and on the face. Joy may often affect the soul rather strongly without showing itself outwardly.

We notice therefore a certain variation in these definitions. JOY is said to be at times residing in the soul, at others it is an external manifestation.⁶ He who possesses something good may REJOICE. The possession of this good, whether it be

life, or health, material goods, honours, friends, results in BEATITUDE and renders one BLISSFUL. This applies to whoever is enjoying the sovereign good, eternal HAPPINESS. BLISS refers to a happy state that occurs haphazardly and can give rise to PLEASURE. The difference between these two lies in that pleasure is an agreeable feeling, whilst happiness, considered as a sentiment, is a sequence of pleasures. This last word has a broader meaning than all the others because it is related to a greater number of objects in whatever concerns the mind, the heart, the senses, fortune.⁷

2.2. Sentiments opposite to Joy

Quite differently, SADNESS is the opposite of joy, just as GRIEF is to gaiety. Sadness is caused by great afflictions and is described as a state whilst grief is like an action compared to a habit. The melancholic mind is dissatisfied with itself and with everything that surrounds it and only conceives sombre ideas. It typifies the modern pessimist.⁸

As we said earlier, De La Salle does not define any of these words. He uses them according to the sense they had in his time and allows himself, as others would, a certain liberty in their use so that he often mixes them up, in particular, pleasure and bliss, the latter being often associated with eternal happiness; on the other hand, as was said before, the word pleasure, in the writings of the Founder will refer especially to the senses while the words gaiety and gay will be used especially to describe facial expressions.

3. ELEMENTS OF BIBLICAL APPROACH

The Bible and Christian revelation provide us with a more relational approach to joy. It is true that St. Paul tells us that we must work out our salvation in fear and trembling (Ph. 2,12), but one must keep in mind that the teaching of Jesus is first of all good news — the meaning of the word GOSPEL itself — and his birth was announced as a joyous event for the people (Lc 1,52; 2,10).

3.1. In the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, we are exhorted to be joyful. The just man places his joy in the Lord (Ps 1,1); a joy meant to last (Jb 20,5) and which is externalised (Pr 29,6). Man may also place his happiness in material goods (Ds 127 B) considered as a blessing from God (Jb 42,10-12) but the greatest gift of the Lord are the paschal exploits, the celebration of which culminates in the liturgical service in the Temple.⁹

3.2. In the New Testament, the exhortation to rejoice will be greater still for Jesus fulfils the promise and the messianic expectation to its perfection. (Lk 1 and 2). By participating in the joy of the trinitarian community, he wishes our joy to be perfect (Jn 15,11). His resurrection not only washes away sin but its consequences as well, so that we can always be happy (1 Th 5,16). Joy is also a fruit of the Spirit (Ga 5,22) for the kingdom of God does not consist solely in eating and drinking but in justice, peace and joy in the Spirit (Rm 14,17; R 97.5). Luke underlines with satisfaction the presence of joy during the persecutions (Lk 6,23; Ac 5,41) in welcoming the word of God (Lk 8.13; Ac 2,46) and in the conversion of sinners (Lk 15.7 and 32; Ac 8,8). This joy is not called into question by the adversities of life (2Co 7,4) or by persecutions (Mt 5.10; Ac 5,41) for by conforming himself to Jesus Christ, the Christian avoids what may hold a threat in creation (Ap 21,4). Just like his ancestors in the faith, the Christian is called to celebrate his joy and it is in the Eucharist that he can thank God with the community (Ac 2,42, 46, 47). All along the liturgical year, he will find opportunities to manifest his joy through the commemoration of the mysteries of Jesus and particularly of the Resurrection.¹⁰ The joy he may experience in the Lord will follow from the peace which reigns in a good conscience and for that he may rely on certain signs (Da 96) such as those given as examples by saint Thomas; the joy one finds in God and in matters of faith, makes one shun any relations with worldly seductions, and the knowledge that one's conscience is free from grave sins.¹¹ In this way, we can see that

the joy of the Christian is intimately related to charity and hope.

4. CHRISTIAN JOY

Faithful to the teaching of the Sorbonne and St. Sulpice, the Founder was convinced that the only way to happiness was the knowledge of God, source of all that is good. It is the Christian's duty to know and love God, for without faith and charity one cannot be happy (Da X C).¹² Consequently, the highest proof of human happiness and joy lies in a vision of faith, such as it emerges from the Gospel and the teaching of the Church.

4.1. God, a source of joy for himself, for the angels, the saints and man on earth

The Founder never ceases to repeat that God is the only happiness, the true joy. "To know God, he says, and to love him must be the sole occupation of the Christian, as these are what he must aim at and all his happiness in this life" (Da 198 D). God is his own happiness in the love he lavishes on himself (I 196 B) and "the joy of the angels is only an overflow of that which God has for himself (I 214 C). "He is also the happiness of the saints": Is there anything I can long for in heaven, if it is not you, o my God, who constitute the happiness of the saints — for to adore God is what makes up all their happiness. (Dc 215 D) — just as you are the only object of your happiness? (I 257 B-C) For this reason, St. Augustine "detached himself from anything human and natural, and acknowledged in this manner that man's happiness is made up of true joy, which is to be found only in God (MF 123.3). Once more, the Founder insists: "It is only in him that we shall find our true happiness, even in this life" (MF 169,1).

The idea that God is our true happiness even in this life, and not only in heaven, is repeated several times: "Our soul having been created by God to enjoy him, all its happiness on earth consists in attaching itself only to him" (MF 90.2); "It is in you alone that I place all my happiness" (I 91 B); "You are also all my joy" (I 91 A). In order for us to enjoy this happiness, we must "ask God for this perfect detachment, in order to attach ourselves only to him, for in him is all the happiness of this

life and of the next (MD 35.1). Already on earth, one can experience this happiness when thinking of God's presence in our midst for, he writes: "Can we experience greater happiness than to have you in our midst?" (E 39).

4.2. The presence of God considered as an anticipated heaven

This happiness and this joy which one experiences on earth are like an anticipated heaven: "It is a source of happiness to have God always present in any place where I go and find myself (...). It is some kind of anticipation of heavenly happiness to be able to be always with you and to always think of you" (EM 8 D). And he insists: "It is satisfying to always have one's mind occupied with God and it is an anticipation of the happiness we will enjoy in heaven. (EM 28 D). God gives certain souls "the grace to lose only rarely or not at all his presence, and that is for them an anticipated happiness and a foretaste of heavenly bliss" (EM 31 A). One must even ask God for the grace to meditate well in order to acquire the habit of the presence of God... because it is an anticipated source of happiness already in this life" (MF 177.3 A). Consequently, the joy of him who loves God is continuous here on earth and throughout all eternity. He possesses in through faith and hope.

5. REASONS TO REJOICE

5.1. The Christian has many reasons to be happy. He may rejoice because he was brought up in the Christian faith (MF 140.1), he was made a child of the Church (Da 213 A), a brother of Jesus (EM 65 C), and he received the gift of Faith (I 95 C) and he possesses divine grace. As a child of the Church, he takes part in its liturgical life and has thus the opportunity to rekindle his joy at the different feasts, on the occasion of the birth of Christ, (Dc 70 C-D-E), his incarnation (MF 112,3), his resurrection (Da 440 A, Dc 94 C, Dc 96 A, MD 29.1). On Sunday, through its hymns and its alleluias, the Church reminds him of his reasons to rejoice (Da 440 A). The Christian finds his happiness in the sacramental life, particularly in the Eucharist and the Mass (I 264 E, 270 C, 43 D,

259 C, 272 E). The sacrament of reconciliation and divine pardon are for him occasions of joy (Da 312 A; I 210 D, E). This joy, is made available to him through prayer (Da 418 C, EM 9 B, MF 130.1, 177.s, 179.3) during which he converses with God who is all his joy (Ps 42.4; I 44 D). He may also rejoice because of the protection afforded him by the angels (MF 168 D). During trials, especially those arising from injustice, in conformity with the beatitudes (Mt 5,8) he may find solace in the promise made by Jesus since "through the practice of the beatitudes, we are promised the full happiness enjoyed in heaven, for Christ has promised those who practise them happiness even here below (Da 189 D, F). On the feasts of the Saints, he can show his happiness, as was done on the Feast of St. John (Dc 206 A) through bonfires. Even death does not dampen the joy of the Christian (Dc 219 E - 220 A).

The joy of the servants of God

In his very fine meditation for the 3rd Sunday after Easter, (MD 34), the Founder enumerates for the Brothers the characteristics of the joy of the servants of God comparing it to that of worldlings. The servants of God possess a joy which is never ending because nobody will ever be able to take it away from them (Jn 16,22). If they suffer, it is only for a short time, because joy will soon follow. Their joy is therefore deep seated, little subject to alteration, for it is built on the love of God which keeps them alive and in God's grace. This joy is interior because it is in their heart and nothing of what is external can penetrate there except what they allow under the influence of the senses. On the contrary, the joy of the worldling is shortlived and will end with this life: an eternal sadness will take its place. Their joy is superficial because it is based on splendour and appearances and the pleasure of the senses which are very fragile and perishable. Finally the joy of worldlings is exterior, and that makes it vulnerable to the misfortunes of life and the preoccupations which upset it and causes them to yield to dejection. It is therefore the servants of God that enjoy genuine happiness whilst that of worldlings is an illusion.

5.2. For the Brother of the Christian Schools

As for the Brother, he has the same reasons to rejoice. Basically, his joy is not different, just as his consecration partakes of the same baptism. It is in intensity that the Brother's joy is greater, because his occupations provide him with more opportunities to have a more intimate contact with the Lord. More particularly through meditation and the sentiment of the presence of God which he should practise continually.

However, the Brother has his own reasons to rejoice and to let happiness overwhelm him. He must "consider himself happy to be able to receive the bread of angels which is offered by Jesus Christ himself" (MD 150.3). The practice of meditation will "provide him with the happiness of always having his mind taken up by the thought of GOD, and that is an anticipation of heavenly bliss (EM 28 D). He may, even, through meditation of simple attention "enjoy an interior consolation which will make his soul find much pleasure in these thoughts" (EM 34 C). The Founder adds that "it is a great satisfaction, when the Brothers are assembled for meditation or for some other exercise, to feel assured that God is in their midst" (EM 9 B). Regularity is another source of happiness for those who live in the Society (R 64 10), just as the help of the exterior supports on which the Brothers should converse during recreations (R 66 21). The Brother may also find his happiness in "being able to read or listen to the reading of Holy Scripture" (MF 100.1). Even more than the exercises and regularity, the religious vocation the Brother has embraced is itself a source of joy. "The holy vocation to which God called us in his kindness is our mother; the novitiate is her bosom; that is where the novices, her spiritual children are conceived, engendered in Jesus Christ, according to St. Paul's expression, and trained to live a truly Christian and religious life. Act in such a way, therefore, you who have the happiness of enjoying this advantage in the novitiate... make sure your conception is immaculate..." (MF 83.3. 12.A). Through his withdrawal from and renunciation of the world, following the example of the saints (MF 109.1, 173.2, 182.1) and of Mary (Dc 202 A)

who thought it a great happiness to have left the world, the Brother must be convinced that it is on the day he bade farewell to the world that "his happiness began on earth to be consummated one day in heaven" (MF 191 1). It is in this vein that he writes to a religious, his niece, that she is "fortunate to be in the religious life, a holy state, conducive to holiness, and which is an honour for her and her salvation (L 120.3). He had written the same thing to Bro. Matthias: "You are fortunate to be in your present state..." (L 47.7). The Founder considered "the advantage of being in a community the highest form of happiness on earth; for him it was heaven in anticipation for in it he enjoyed God as far as faith rendered that possible (EM 47 C). He made his the word of the author of the Imitation that the religious life is "a pleasant and attractive form of slavery... through which are acquired the sovereign good and a happiness that will last forever" (MF 83.1, 12 A).

Hence the Brother must not be afraid to be deprived of sensible consolations (MD 35.2) and believe, that in times of aridity and interior trials, he would decline appreciably in the state of holiness God had placed him in" (MD 135.2). He should look for the privation of sensible consolations (R 106.13, 206.16) to form a much more intimate relationship with God. He should not feel dejected (L 47.10) or yield to the false sadness of worldlings (R 206.16). On the contrary, he must "always show happiness on his features (RC 55.3, R 176.7-9).

5.3. For the Christian teacher

The Christian teacher too has special reasons to feel happy. He must admire the kindness which God shows in providing for the salvation of children (MR 193.3, 197.1) and feel happy to be associated with so holy and exalted a mission (MR 199.1) thanks to which he can be an honour for the Church, in spite of the trials and sufferings of his ministry (MF 78.3). He should rejoice to be able to exercise the same ministry as St. Paul and numerous saints who were useful to the Church (MR 199.1. MF 153.1, 170.3, 78.3) He has his reward here on earth in seeing that God is well served (MR 207.2) by those whom he has instructed and realising that his work has not been useless. (MR 207.2). Like St. Paul, he derives his glory

from the knowledge that the Gospel has been preached gratuitously (MR 194.1, 207.2). He finds his joy also in the good conduct of the children who live according to the principles of justice and piety (MR 207.3), in that religion "has gained ground"; for all these reasons, the Brother is grateful to God (MR 207.3). In heaven, he will have every reason to say, with St. Paul, that the children have been his hope, his joy and his crown of glory (Ph 4.1 - MR 207.3). His happiness will be greater than that of those who will have worked only for their personal salvation (MR 208.1) and his reward will be proportionate to the good he will have done to souls (MR 208.1). His pupils will share in his happiness (MR 208.2) for they will not fail to point out the zeal he used to bring about their salvation (MR 208.2). "The consolation of the teacher described by La Salle is not a narcissistic joy or one centred on the Brother, on his personal salvation, but concerns God's plan being already carried out through his work".¹³

5.4. For the pupils

As far as the pupils are concerned, joy is not reserved for heaven. Several elements may contribute to make them happy at school. First of all, the personality of the teacher and the style of the relationships he has with them. De La Salle wanted the teachers to be like elder brothers for the youngsters, who are not only pupils but also disciples.¹⁴ The teachers should possess a whole set of virtues able to attract the pupils, inspire confidence, and reassure them. Those most often referred to by the Founder are kindness, patience, gravity. In imitation of his master, Jesus, (RB 31 E, MD 65.2), the teacher must show kindness at all times when he talks to his pupils (MD 2.2); when he invites them to come to school (CE 183 E); especially when he corrects them (MD 204.3, MD 33,1, CE 140-179). He must show the severity of a father, a compassion full of tenderness and a certain kindness which must however be lively and efficacious" (CE 144 B). If to kindness he joins firmness (CE 140 C, 141 C), he must know when and how to sympathize with their weaknesses and their infirmities (CE 142 C) and adapt the punishment to the fault and the temperament of the children, several of whom ought not to be reprimanded in

public or severely (CE 157-167). He needs to be patient (R 105.13, L 56.3) and in this, he can find inspiration in the patience of St. Cassian (MF 155.2). As for gravity, it does not consist in putting on a severe appearance (CE 19 B) for "it is wrong to put on a severe or forbidding appearance" (RB 10 E). "The serious man, says Trevoux, combines a reserved appearance with wisdom and maturity of mind, that is why people trust him and he is able to control their minds".¹⁵

A key expression in the writings of the Founder is that the Brothers must love their pupils (MD 33.2). This love must even express itself through fondness (MF 101.3) such as a mother has for her children. It must be shown particularly towards poor children (MF 80.3). When he does that, the Brother will show that he possesses the spirit which Mme de Maintenon wished to see in her schools: "The best means to be obeyed is to deserve to be loved by the pupils. To achieve that, you yourselves must love", she used to say. And add: "Patience, vigilance, gentleness, these words should be engraved on all the doors".¹⁶ As for the Founder, he wanted them engraved on the hearts of the Brothers, who were in duty bound to avail themselves of the affection the pupils had for them to draw them closer to God" (MF 101.3).

To the attitudes and behaviour of the teacher, La Salle adds a certain number of pedagogical principles which renders the atmosphere of the schools welcoming and a source of satisfaction and joy for the pupils. Education, which he considers an undertaking prompted by disinterestedness and zeal, must base itself on a deep and individualised familiarity with the child to be taught (CE 236-237). Thus, the teacher will be able to suit his apostolate to each child's moods (cf. CE Catalogues) and the present and future needs of the pupils. The children's efforts will be encouraged and competition will be spurred on. More than that, they will be deeply involved in the smooth running of the school, in the various duties for which they are responsible (CE 204-218).¹⁷

What is to be thought of the allusions which J. Delumeau makes to some canticles sung in lasallian schools and which according to him could contribute to develop a morbid preoccupation with death and hell?¹⁸ It is true that such texts are

found in certain hymns but the place which they hold does not outweigh positive sentiments better able to generate joy and confidence in God. Shouldn't one acknowledge that the lasallian school was dependent on the values prevalent in its time and its sensitivity and that Abbé de Rancé, for example, did not hesitate "to preach to the courtiers, the nobles, the noble ladies whom he knew, humility and remorse in the same way: "Every Christian, he used to say, is bound to live in perpetual penance, experiencing the bitterness of a spirit troubled and afflicted by fear; the Christian must satiate and inebriate himself on crosses and opprobrium".¹⁹

6. HOW DID ST. LA SALLE EXPRESS HIS JOY: RB AND SPIRIT OF FAITH

De La Salle would willingly have subscribed to these ideas and his biographer does not fail to enumerate his mortifications and penances (BLAIN 2, 451-465). However, nobody has ever said that the Founder possessed a forbidding and surly spirit. Quite the contrary, everyone stresses his affability towards everybody, particularly towards his Brothers who called on him with confidence. (id. 476). His demeanour was stamped with a seriousness tempered by gentleness and evidenced in him a joy which made him look amiable (id 308). His conduct drew its inspiration from the rules of decorum like that of every gentleman of his time. Thus, serenity always showed on his face (id 310). He never failed to express his happiness in his correspondence with his Brothers, He rejoiced at their good health (L 19.12, 26.2) as well as the good inclinations they told him about (L 48.1, 10.8) and the successes they achieved in their employment. The Founder in spite of his detachment from earthly goods, did not have a negative view of them. It was legitimate to ask God for them and to possess them provided they were directed towards God and did not harm the process of one's salvation (Db 248). The recreations which he prescribed for the Brothers after meals were to be pleasant as well as edifying, yet he did exclude from them "any type of games, even though they were harmless" to avoid any dissipation which

would have harmed their interior life. He only intervened in the case of an uncontrolled exuberance or excessive manifestations of joy, very loud laughter, buffoonery, anything that was unbecoming in an educated person (BLAIN 2, 313). Neither did he want to see sour and melancholy faces. The face has to be gay, serene, equable, without fluctuating with sad or joyful circumstances (id 310).

In John Baptist de La Salle's features, joy is inspired therefore by the behaviour of the courteous man which he describes in "Les Règles de la bienséance et de la Civilité Chrétienne" but it is based substantially on his privileged relationship with his Master and the world of spirituality, thanks to his spirit of faith. If we lose sight of these two fundamental reference positions, we will find it impossible to understand fully his sentiments and convictions concerning joy and all that which defines it in depth, i.e. the presence of God which may amount to the possession of God already here on earth (Em 19 B, 47 D). So, throughout all his life, he has been faithful to the formation received from his parents and his teachers at Saint-Sulpice.

¹ Cf. *Cahiers lasalliens*, POUTET Yves, *Le XVII^e siècle et les origines lasalliennes*.

² DEVILLE, R., *L'école française de spiritualité*, p. 126.

³ MÉLAGE, Frère, *Le créateur de l'école populaire. - Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, p. 213.

⁴ DEVILLE, R., *op. cit.*, p. 173.

⁵ *Ib.* pp. 101-123.

⁶ *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, T. V, p. 234; T. IV, pp. 374-375; T. II, pp. 853-854.

⁷ *Ibid.*, T. V, p. 251; T. I, p. 815; T. IV, p. 83; T. I, pp. 961-962.

⁸ *Ibid*, mélancolique: T. V, p. 912; chagrin: T. II, p. 392; affliction: T. I, p. 143; tristesse: T. VIII, p. 000.

⁹ *Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe* Band 2, s. 40-42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* a 42-44.

¹¹ *La foi de l'Eglise*, p. 235.

¹² POUTET, Yves, *Le XVII^e siècle et les origines lasalliennes*, T. 1, pp. 252-253.

¹³ CAMPOS, Frère Miguel, *L'itinéraire évangélique de saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle et le recours à l'écriture dans ses Méditations pour le temps de la retraite*, Vol. II, p. 329, CL 46.

¹⁴ PUNGIER, Jean, *Comment est née la Conduite des Ecoles*, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, T. IV, p. 606.

¹⁶ In Anselme, Frère, *Aux Sources de la Pédagogie moderne*, p. 87.

¹⁷ PUNGIER Jean, *Ibid.* pp. 65-97.

¹⁸ DELUMEAU, Jean, *Le péché et la peur - La Culpabilisation en Occident (XIII^e-XVIII^e s.)*. 385, 400, 401, 402, 417, 450, 451, 453, 454, 455, 456, 500, 524.

¹⁹ GAXOTTE, Pierre, *La France de Louis XIV*, p. 218.

Complementary themes:

Brothers of the Christian Schools; Child-Pupil-Disciple; Christian; Christian Teacher; Consecration; Consolation-Tepidity-Dryness; Correction; Disciples; Education; Faith-Spirit of faith; Gentleness; Guardian Angels; Heart-to touch hearts; Incarnation; Instruction-to instruct; Love-Charity; Ministry; Peace; Piety; State; World; Zeal.

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