

# 50. REFLECTION

## Summary:

1. General presentation of the reflection (in French: *la réflexion*). 1.1. The Five Reflections. – 2. In the *Catéchisme de Montpellier*. – 3. Other references in the writings of the Founder. 3.1. *La Conduite des Écoles*. 3.2. The Rule of 1718. – 4. The word *réflexion* itself. – 5. *Réflexion* and *examen*. – 6. Relationship to other emphases of De La Salle's writings and practices. 6.1. Content. 6.2. The maxims of the Gospel. – 7. Touching hearts. – 8. Development of the tradition in the Institute. 8.1. The *Conduite des Écoles* for 1838. 8.2. The Reflection in General Chapters and Circulars. 8.3. The development of Collections of Reflections. – 9. Some concluding remarks.

Bro. Gerard RUMMERY

1. The **Reflection**, in French = la *Réflexion*, is an integral part of the daily programme of the Christian schools founded by John Baptist de La Salle. The earliest reference is to be found in the text of the *Exercises of Piety carried out every day in the Christian School*, Cahier Lasallien No. 19, p 8-9:

*“He who begins the prayers, reads every day the five points of the following reflections(sic), and after reading them, repeats the points to be explained by the Teacher for this day. When there are five school days in the week, he repeats the first point on the first day, the second point on the second day and so on for the others. When there are only four school days, he begins by repeating the second point, and when there are only three school days in the week, he does not repeat the first two points but begins with the third”* (ibid, p 8).

1.1. The five reflections themselves are preceded by the following remark.

*“In order to put oneself into a disposition of not falling into sin today, it is necessary to make a number of reflections and good resolutions”.*

The text of the **five reflections** follows immediately.

1.1.1. *We should consider that this day has been given to us only in order for us to work for our salvation.*

1.1.2. *We should be attentive to the possibility that this will be the last day of our lives.*

1.1.3. *We should take a firm resolution to pass this whole day in serving God fervently so as to win eternal life.*

1.1.4. *We should prefer to die rather than offend God today through sin.*

1.1.5. *We should reflect on the faults which we ordinarily commit, foresee the occasions which cause us to fall, and take the means to avoid them.*

2. The text and the general orientation of these five reflections bears a strong resemblance to a passage to be found in the **Catéchisme de Montpellier (1702)** attributed to Charles-Joachim Colbert (Vol. 2, page 225 Prayers), which reads as follows:

*Let us consider that this day has been given for us to work for our salvation; that this day will be, perhaps, the last day of our lives; that death will surprise*

*us when we are not thinking about it. Let us take care not to fall into the faults we committed yesterday. Let us concern ourselves with God often during the day. Let us not pass a single day without some pious reading which instructs us appropriately in our duties, or edifies us. Let us raise our hearts to God from time to time by short but fervent aspirations. Let us flee from idleness and every other sin. Finally, let us live a full and regulated life which conforms us to that of Jesus Christ, our Head and Model, so that we come in this way to eternal life. (page cxlii).*

The original language of this text, when compared with that given in CL 18 pp 8-9, leaves little doubt that they are variations of the same text, or that both are drawn from a common original source.

In the resolutions of the General Chapter of 1745, there are two which affirm the Brothers' intention to avoid any Jansenist contamination. As one general precaution, the Chapter prescribes that each house should obtain the two-volume listing of all Jansenist literature. As a second, more specific direction, the Chapter prescribes:

*"No further use will be made in our houses of the Catechism of Montpellier by Colbert, since it contains Jansenist propositions".*

How curious then that the **five original reflections** (dating from 1702 in the earliest Archive edition) should have escaped this censure. They are certainly tinged with a strong moral pessimism, tending towards Jansenism. Was this an oversight, or does it suggest that the **Exercices de Piété** and the Montpellier Catechism were drawn from another, common source, as already suggested? Frère Gilles Beaudet (Sources FEC Vol. 4 No. 4, p 5 1981) suggests that the texts are practically identical in content when they are set out and compared (op. cit.).

### 3. OTHER REFERENCES IN THE WRITINGS OF THE FOUNDER

There are explicit references to the practice of the reflection in other writings which we can attribute to John Baptist de La Salle, viz. the **Conduite des Écoles** and the **Rule of 1718**.

#### 3.1. **Conduite des Écoles (CL 24)**

There are three references in Chapter VII Art ii

page 77, where the practice is explained in terms similar to the already quoted reference to the **Exercices de Piété**.

*"1. There are five reflections in the morning prayer, for the five days of the week. They will be read every day, making a slight pause between each one. The pupil who recites the prayer, after reading them all, repeats the one to which particular attention is to be given on that day. Then there will be a pause for about the space of a Miserere, during which the teacher will offer a short reflection to the pupils on the topic, adapted to their understanding.*

*2. The five reflections are thus repeated in order and each one serves as a subject for exhortation, one following the other, on each of the five days on which school is held.*

*3. If there is a feast in the week on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday, on the two days on which school is held, the teacher will speak on the subject of the first two reflections and on the Thursday, the third topic. If the feast is on Friday or Saturday, the teacher will speak on the subject of the fourth reflection on Thursday, and, on whatever day there is no feast, on the fifth topic. If there are two feasts in the week, he will for that reason not make the first reflection, and if there are three feasts, he will omit the first two reflections".*

On Page 123, in words which echo directly the 1718 Rule in a reference to the **silence of the teacher**, we read:

*"The teacher will speak aloud only on three occasions: first, when he has to correct a pupil because none of the pupils can do so; second, when he teaches catechism; third, during the reflections and examinations of conscience".*

#### 3.2. **The Rule of 1718**

This text, which does not appear in the Rule of 1705, seems to find its place in the Rule of 1718 along with other aspects transposed from the **Conduite**.

*"This is why they will speak only on three occasions... 3) in the reflections which every Brother should make during the prayers, morning and evening, and then they will speak only in a moderate tone" (CL 25, p 43).*

#### 4. THE WORD "RÉFLEXION" ITSELF

According to the Dictionary of 1772 (Le Grand Vocabulaire François, Paris, M.DCC. LXII pp. 338-40) the word is related to the Latin word *meditatio*:

*"The action of the spirit which reflects, serious meditation, deep reflection about something"*.

The noun and the verb *réfléchir* were in common usage at the time of the Founder who uses both expressions with their present sense.

#### 5. RÉFLEXION AND EXAMEN

It is clear in the Founder's mind that there is an important link between the reflections which follow the morning prayer and the examination of conscience which was an integral part of the afternoon prayers, before the dismissal of the classes. Writing of this *examen*, De La Salle says:

*"This examination of conscience is divided into four parts, and each part or article into 5 points"* (CL 24, 77).

There is, however, meant to be an integral link with the same points as those for the reflections which follow the morning prayer, as the text clearly indicates:

*"As regards the five points of the article to be read during the week, the same order and the same practices as indicated with regard to the five reflections for morning prayer, are to be kept"* (CL 24, 77).

It is not easy to make a close connection between the articles of the afternoon examen and the five reflections of the morning, except in the most general terms. The afternoon examen concentrates on the kind of faults into which children are most likely to fall by neglect of their ordinary duties to parents, teachers or to one another, and differs substantially with the preparation for the Sacrament of Penance (CL 17). Perhaps the general relationship is that the experienced teacher could bring the general points of the original reflections to bear upon a particular, practical focus in the life of the child at school, as for example a vice to be avoided, a virtue to be practised. Another possibility is that the teacher, who had spent the whole day with the same children, could remind his

pupils during the afternoon prayers of the particular point of reflection which he had given them in the morning.

#### 6. RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER EMPHASES OF DE LA SALLE'S WRITINGS AND PRACTICES

Although there seems to be only one explicit reference to the reflection as such in the Meditations of the Founder, there is a strong inner coherence between the **content** and **daily frequency** of the reflection and other emphases to be found in De La Salle's writings and school practices.

6.1. **The content** of the original five reflections is a reminder of his concern for children whom he saw as "far from salvation". Prolonged reflections on the need to work for salvation, on the shortness of life and the unexpectedness of death, the importance of serving God and not offending him, the cultivation of greater awareness of the common ways of offending against God's law, are all reminders of De La Salle's insistence in the Rule of 1705 of how difficult it is to repair the habitual faults of the young at a later age. Among the many references which could be cited in this regard, the most appropriate would be articles 3, 4 and 6 of the Rule of 1705 as given in CL 25 pp. 16-17:

*"The end of this institute is to give a Christian education to children and it is for this purpose that schools are maintained where teachers, having these children under their care from morning until evening, can teach them to lead good lives by instructing them in the mysteries of our holy religion, by inspiring them with Christian maxims, and so offer them a suitable education"* (3).

*"...It is necessary that there be persons who substitute for the fathers and mothers in order to instruct these children as they need to be in the mysteries of religion and in the principles of a Christian life"* (4).

*"...As the principal fruit to be expected from the institution of the Christian schools is to forestall these disorders and prevent their evil consequences, it is easy to judge their importance and their necessity"* (6).

6.2. De La Salle's insistence on the importance of teaching children the *maxims of the Gospel* can be found in many of his writings. The third point of the Meditation 91, for the end of the year, for example, raises a number of points with regard to the duty of the teacher towards his pupils, which remind us of aspects of the reflection, to which he explicitly refers:

*"Do (your pupils) know their religion? If they are ignorant of it, or know it only imperfectly, is not this your fault? Have you been careful to teach them the maxims and practices of the holy Gospel and have them practise them? Have you suggested to them some practices suitable to their state and age? All these ways of instructing them should often have been the subject of your reflections and you should have studied to succeed in doing this"*.

7. There is also an important connection between the subject matter of the reflection and De La Salle's insistence on "touching hearts". If the teacher is to be restrained in his speaking with his pupils it is so that when he does speak, he will be listened to more attentively. The emphasis on careful preparation of the reflection suggests that it was to be one of the important moments of the day when heart spoke to hearts (cf. "touching hearts", especially the following references from the Meditations for Sundays and Feasts: 33:2; 43:3; 44:2; 65:2; 79:2; 81:2; 144:1).

This sensitivity to the quality of what we would call today the **relationship** with the pupils is found in a reference to a special feature of the catechism lessons for Sundays and feasts (Conduite Ch. 16 Art. iii, in CL 24, 102):

*"On Sundays and holy days, when the Catechism lasts three times as long as on the other days, he will always choose some story that the pupils will enjoy and tell it to them in a way that will please them and renew their attention. He will tell it with details that will prevent them from being bored"*.

Was this a natural corollary from that special relationship of speaking in faith which marked the reflection?

## 8. DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRADITION IN THE INSTITUTE

The reflection is one of those foundational Lasallian practices which was expanded from its original form during the development of the Institute. Some of the main lines of this development can be suggested, even though there are significant gaps in the documentation available to follow its development in every detail.

The original form and content of the five reflections must have become irksome as the schools kept children for a much longer period of time. While it is true that the truths contained in the original reflections are in themselves perennial, nevertheless the coming of the boarding schools in the 18th century and the development of many secondary schools in the nineteenth century must have pushed the Brothers to allow their tradition to evolve beyond the original limits of content.

There is already some hint of this when the Chapter of 1787, for example, recognises that the Brothers are bound to teach the catechism of the diocese in which they are working and follow the prayers prescribed by this catechism, but at the same time insists on maintaining the reflection:

*"The prayers of the diocese where the Brothers are established will be recited instead of those ordinarily recited in the schools, but without cutting out the morning reflections and the evening examination of conscience"* (Chapter of 1787, Art. 38, page 107).

8.1. The first reference to an enlarged sequence of reflections appears to be in the revised edition of the **Conduite des Écoles** for 1838 (Ch. XIX art. ii) which states:

*"The book of the Exercises of Piety in use in the Christian Schools contains a sequence of reflections (sic) on the principal duties of a Christian. They are divided into five articles which serve as the topic for exhortations for a month. Each article contains five reflections, one for each school day of the week"*.

Frère Gilles Beaudet (Sources F.E.C. Vol. 4

No. 3 p. 2) notes however that the **Exercices de Piété** printed in Rouen as a supplement to the Duties of a Christian in 1845, does not contain the newer form found in the edition cited above. Unfortunately, since the Rome Archives does not contain any copy of the **Exercices de Piété** printed between 1762 and 1885, we cannot be any clearer on this point. But from the text which follows, it seems likely that an enlarged series was already in general usage by 1838. Here follows the full text of the relevant section.

## ARTICLE II.

### *Concerning the Reflections in the morning prayer & the exams of the evening*

*The book of the Exercises of Piety in use in the Christian Schools contains a sequence of reflections on the principal duties of a Christian. They are divided into five articles so as to serve as topics for exhortations for a month. Each article contains five reflections, one for each school day of the week. Every day at the morning prayer, the reflection corresponding to the day will be read, and the teacher will explain it during the time needed for a good **Miserere**, making the children aware of their obligations in this matter and suggesting the means and resolutions which they should take to carry out these duties faithfully.*

*There are also for the evening an equal number of articles and reflections which should be read in the same manner. They have a certain resemblance to the corresponding ones of the morning, so that they can serve as a subject of examination on the way the day has been spent, and the accomplishment of the resolutions taken in this regard during the morning. In this way, during each month the children will have their principal duties presented to them, as well as the most usual faults common to their age-group. This can be of great benefit to them, especially if it leads them to develop the good habit of foreseeing each morning the faults they are most likely to commit during the day, and to examine themselves in the evening on the resolutions they had taken. It is in these short exhortations that a teacher, who appreciates the incalculable value of a soul, should show his zeal for winning to God*

*those who are confided to him. He will, then, be careful always to prepare what he has to say, so that, being convinced of it himself, he can state it with more conviction and in a more persuasive manner.*

The evolution, not only in the number of topics for consideration, but in the broader view of the Christian life is quite striking. This would appear to be a development, very much in harmony with the continual updating of the **Conduite des Ecoles** as the Brothers saw the need for new or changed emphases (The series for the five weeks is in annex without further comment).

Note that there are only three topics assigned for this 5th week, giving some 23 topics for each month.

### 8.2. The reflection in General Chapters and Circulars

Besides the General Chapter referred to earlier, other General Chapters have referred to the practice of the Reflection and encouraged the Brothers to maintain it. Thus, the General Chapter of 1853 (Resolution XII), specifies that “*school will end in the morning at 10.50 with the recitation of a decade of the Rosary. This decade will be followed by the Reflection, after which a Pater and Ave will be said*”.

The General Chapter of 1884, reflecting the growing lack of uniformity possible in the Institute, makes the following remark:

*“Reflections vary according to circumstances. When feast-days are approaching, the teacher will speak of the aspects relating to the feast, such as the ceremonies to take place, attendance, processions and any special matters relating to the feast. On Confession days, there will be consideration of the dispositions necessary for the sacrament of penance. On Communion days, the teacher will give a reminder about acts of faith, humility, adoration and thanksgiving, which will serve equally well for preparation as for thanksgiving”* (Circular 33, pp. 30-31).

In Circular 197 (6th January 1915), Brother Imier de Jésus reminds the Institute of the three forms of religious teaching carried out by the Brothers viz. the catechism lesson, the exhortation or reflection, and the explanation of the Gospel. Speaking of the reflection, he remarks:

*“The ideal of the daily exhortation or reflection is*

*to enlighten the conscience about moral principles, move the will to carry out firm resolutions, and, if possible, satisfy the taste of the listeners with well-balanced and serious words. The reflection is a powerful means of formation"* (Circ. 197, pp. 35-36). Other references to the reflection can be found in Circulars 107 pp. 120, 127, and in no. 346, page 18).

### 8.3. The development of Collections of Reflections

It seems natural that this enlarged number of topics for reflections led to the collection and subsequent publication of **Collections of Reflections**. By the late 1870's, there are already examples in France and Canada (and only a few years later in the U.S.A. in an English adaptation), printed copies of collections of reflections to respond to the five weeks programme.

In the 20th century, there appears to develop a much greater freedom in the choice of the topics for reflection. There are many different examples of collections made by individual Brothers or published for general use.

After a period of relative eclipse in many countries after the Second World War, interest in the Lasallian tradition has once again seen the recovery of the tradition in France. Copies of reflections are prepared for each school month and circulated to Lasallian schools and communities from a central point.

## 9. SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

There are strong reasons of a pastoral nature for the recovery of this tradition of the reflection, spoken from the heart of the teacher to the hearts of the pupils. It represents a particular aspect of that "touching hearts" which has characterised the work of John Baptist de La Salle and his Brothers. The development of the tradition by successive generations of Brothers is one of the best indices of the value of the initial perception of De La Salle and his first followers.

The reflection is consistent with so many emphases in Lasallian writings, especially the concern frequently expressed by De La Salle that the Brother's work needs a deep spirit of faith, of zeal, of prayer, and a willingness to speak in faith dur-

ing the privileged moments of the reflection. This was one of the consistent perceptions of the Brothers from the District of Torino, who replied to a questionnaire on the Reflection, in the pages of *Rivista Lasalliana* in 1934. For many, the reflection was linked necessarily with the meditation made by the Brother himself. The reflection was his moment to share with his pupils the fruit of his own contemplation.

Allow Brother Imier de Jésus to have the last word:

*"This short exhortation requires a meditated preparation as well as prayer. ...The reflection is certainly not a dissertation on a religious topic: it is a cordial and intimate chat by a 'man of God' on a question of piety. You could say that it is a way of taking the spiritual temperature of the one who gives it"* (Circular 197, page 36).

## ANNEX

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR EVERY DAY OF THE WEEK

Let us make some reflections and resolutions  
in order to pass this day without sin

#### FIRST WEEK

**1st day.** Let us consider that God has created us to know, love, and serve him.

**2nd day.** Let us consider that God is everywhere present, that he sees all things, and that he knows even our most secret thoughts.

**3rd day.** Let us consider that Jesus Christ is not only our Redeemer, but also our Model in the practice of virtue.

**4th day.** Let us consider that our hearts should be the dwelling-place of the Holy Ghost, whom we have received in baptism.

**5th day.** Let us consider that by baptism we became children of God the Father, members of Jesus Christ, and temples of the Holy Ghost.

#### SECOND WEEK

**1st day.** Let us consider that we are obliged to observe faithfully the commandments of God, and that we should be resolved to die rather than to transgress them.

**2nd day.** Let us consider that we are bound to obey the Church, and to observe her commandments, because she speaks to us on the part of God.

**3rd day.** Let us consider that we should have great respect for religion and its practices, for holy things, and for persons consecrated to God.

**4th day.** Let us consider that, God having revealed the truths of religion, we ought therefore to believe them, and live according to them.

**5th day.** Let us consider that a great means of sanctification is to have a sincere devotion towards the Most Blessed Virgin, our guardian angels, and our holy patrons.

### THIRD WEEK

**1st day.** Let us consider how important it is to accustom ourselves to live holily from our earliest years.

**2nd day.** Let us consider what are the defects into which we usually fall, and let us take efficacious means to avoid them.

**3rd day.** Let us consider how great is the goodness of God, who, notwithstanding our sins, loves us, does good to us, and wishes to save us.

**4th day.** Let us consider that whatever is temporal will soon pass away, and that the real goods are virtue and grace, which alone can procure for us the happiness of heaven.

**5th day.** Let us consider that scandal is a dangerous

sin, and that we ought to avoid it, and edify one another.

### FOURTH WEEK

**1st day.** Let us consider that we can do nothing without grace; we ought, therefore, often to pray to obtain it.

**2nd day.** Let us consider that we ought always to watch, that we may not be surprised by the enemies of our salvation.

**3rd day.** Let us reflect that nothing is more deplorable than the condition of those who live in the state of mortal sin.

**4th day.** Let us resolve to serve God well, and to fulfil our duties faithfully.

**5th day.** Let us dispose ourselves too die rather than offend God.

### FIFTH WEEK

**1st day.** Let us ask the advantages of a death in the state of grace.

**2nd day.** Let us reflect on the misfortunes that follow a death in mortal sin.

**3rd day.** Let us consider that, with the grace of God, which need never be wanting to us, we may live like saints, and die happily, if we take the necessary means.

Bro. Gerard RUMMERY