

51. RENUNCIATION / DETACHMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The words “abnegation” or “renunciation” and “detachment” bring to mind automatically the words of Jesus in the Gospel: “If anyone wants to come after me, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me” (Mt 16,14; Mk 8.34); “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will attach himself to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Money”. (Mt 6,24; Lk 16.13) abnegation and detachment are conditions without which following and serving the Lord are out of the question. In the Gospel, people follow Jesus and attach themselves to him because they love him with all their heart, with all their soul and with all their energies; this presupposes the renunciation of all that is not him and does not lead to him, all that may constitute an obstacle to the flourishing in one's person and in the world of the values of the Kingdom which he preaches. The life of the saints is in one way or another, an illustration of this Gospel truth: in order to draw close to the Lord, it is necessary for him to take over the

whole of one's life. Through his writings and life, John Baptist de La Salle reminds us in his own way, as a spiritual director, of this same truth.

1. WHAT HIS LIFE TEACHES US

Let us start by listening to him:

“If I only had believed that the care I was taking of the schoolteachers out of pure charity would eventually have forced me to live with them, I would have given it up; for as I naturally considered inferior to my valet those who especially at the beginning I was obliged to employ in the school, the very thought that I would have to live with them, would have seemed unbearable to me” (BLAIN 1, 169).

This is the confession which he makes in the *Mémoire des Commencements* such as Blain wrote it down in his biography.¹ It makes one imagine the renunciations John Baptist de La Salle had to endure to place himself in the service of this “work of God” which was the foundation of the Institute. Between the young canon aged 28 who met

Nyel in the community of the Sisters of the Child Jesus in 1679 and the person whom the Brothers loved to call “Monsieur notre très cher Père”, 40 years later, a long path of renunciation had been trodden; there was the slow work of the Holy Spirit leading the Founder from commitment to commitment, from renunciation to renunciation, from voluntary deprivation to voluntary deprivation, to make him adhere more fully to His will and thus participate in his plan of salvation.

1.1. “If anyone comes to me without preferring me to his father, or mother... brothers and sisters... he cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14,26). John Baptist de La Salle had to leave his family. That, as one may imagine, was not an easy job. The events that took place and their sequence are well known: we are in Rheims: from 1680 to 1681, JBS invites to his home, for meals, the newly recruited teachers, in order to be able to follow them up; on June 24, 1681, he welcomes them and lodges them in his own family house; on June 24, 1682, he leaves his father’s house and starts living with them in a house rented for that purpose.

The reactions of the family and the family circle are also well known: as a result of this initiative of the young canon, his family will deprive him of the guardianship of his younger brothers and sisters (guardianship which he exercised since the death of his father in 1672, which was interrupted for a short time and then resumed), two of his brothers left him in 1681. His family’s complaint: “They blamed him for having blemished the family’s reputation, for having stained his own blood, and for having degraded himself by admitting strangers to his table; for rendering himself ridiculous by not making any distinction between them and his own brothers... and finally they said that he shunned the company of educated people and that hence it was no longer considered proper to be seen in his company” (BLAIN 1, 176).

In this way, JBS was giving up a world to allow another to take possession of him; he leaves a world, his own, to become embodied in another, that of the masters; he dissociates himself in a certain way from his social environment, that of the middle-class of Rheims, to associate himself with the world of the working-class, the poor and people of no consequence.

1.2. “Whoever does not give up all his possessions cannot be my disciple...” (Lk 14.33).

The eldest son of a well-to-do-family — his father was a magistrate of noble lineage — John Baptist de La Salle owned a patrimony which guaranteed his future. As a Canon of the Cathedral of Rheims, he possessed a prebendal benefice and, above all, he enjoyed a very high status in the Church.

The canon and the son of a rich family introduces himself to the teachers to exhort them to practise the spirit of complete trust in Providence through the renunciation of earthly goods and a filial confidence in their Father in Heaven (CL 7, 187). According to Father P. Rayez, (p. 7), John Baptist de La Salle is incontestably “one of the best representatives of the doctrine of self-abnegation in the 17th and 18th centuries”. It is the spirit he wishes to inculcate in the teachers, who are now his disciples. He thinks he would do well to exhort them by words quoted from the Gospel (cf Mt 6,25-34). He will learn at his own expense, that only the authentic witness — whose words correspond to a lived experience — can touch hearts: “It is easy to speak of the spirit of self-abnegation when one lacks nothing, as is your case!”, retorted the teachers.

Uttered to dispute a point or by way of provocation, these words urge JBS to examine how far he can practise self-abnegation if he wishes to share the life and destiny of the teachers to implement the mission God asked them to do together.

And, what happened to his canonry? He renounces it on August 16th 1683, in favour of a poor unknown priest instead of a member of his family — his brother for example — as it could have been expected.

His patrimony? He sells it to obtain enough bread for the unfortunate victims of the winter famine of 1683-1684, and not to found his budding Institute as the teachers hoped he would. He will never go against the principle imparted to him by Father Barré; the schools you founded would melt away (a pun between FONDER: to found and FONDRE: to melt) if they were not founded solely on Providence”.

All that was not easy, of course. De La Salle needed to reflect considerably, to pray and to seek help from spiritual advisors in order to discern

which decision to take. That is the price a Founder has to pay to obtain the grace of founding an Institute. He says that much himself:

“God who does everything wisely and gently, and who is not accustomed to force the will of men, desiring to make me commit myself to take over completely the management of the schools, did it in an imperceptible manner and over a long period of time; so that, one commitment led to another, without my having been aware of it from the start” (BLAIN 1, 169).

1.3. “If anyone comes to me without preferring me... to his own life, he cannot be my disciple. He who does not carry his cross and walk after me cannot be my disciple” (LK 14, 26-27).

God’s conduct towards JBS was aimed precisely at leading him from one commitment to another, from one renunciation to another, as far as he could go: when he left his home, he had also to give up his property and his canonry.

If God required of him all that, it was to invite him to a more radical and more drastic renunciation: self-renunciation. The rest of his life proves it. In fact, the life of the Founder has been a kenosis itinerary; at very precise times, God will require of him new ways of surpassing himself, in moments of “perplexity”.

This happened for example in 1691. His work seemed to have taken off beautifully, then...: many Brothers left the Institute, the seminary for country schoolteachers created in Rheims several years previously disappeared; the Paris seminary for the little Brothers as well ceased to exist; court cases were started against him by the Master-Writers of Paris (cf. BLAIN 1, 292-302); Brother Henri L’Heureux whom he was training for the priesthood died unexpectedly (id. 397-311); the untimely meddling of the parish priest of St. Sulpice threatened seriously the identity of the new Institute: at the end of 1690, JBS succumbs to an illness, like so many Brothers suffering from overwork.

As one may see, the cascade of misfortunes is very impressive and liable to wear out the dynamism of JBS who is now 40 years old.

“That is the sad situation in which the pious founder finds himself at the end of 1690, after so many sacrifices, so many troubles and so much hard work, so many crosses and persecutions, so many

semblances of success, he finds himself in about the same situation that prevailed ten years ago, with few Brothers, having made hardly any progress and afraid lest he sees it perish” (BLAIN 1, 312).

Under these circumstances in which God seems to abandon his own handiwork, JBS, full of faith and hope, abandons himself totally to Him, through a perpetual vow of association and union with two other Brothers, Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Vuyart, “to procure with all their power and all their dedication the establishment of the society of the Christian Schools, in the manner which will seem most agreeable and advantageous to the said society... without any human consideration whatsoever”. This is the heroic vow of November 21, 1691.

And that is not the end of the tunnel yet! In Paris, the masters of the little schools and the master-writers do not cool down, they start one court case after another against JBS and the Brothers, from 1702 onwards. The schools are closed in 1706 because of the harshness of their attacks. In this crisis, De La Salle loses the support of the parish priest of St. Sulpice; his “enemies” attack on all sides. He must in the end look for solitude in the Monastery of the Carmelites, in Paris, to pray and reflect; he begins to experience “doubts”. In 1711, according to Maillefer, his reputation is put in jeopardy (“Clément affair” cf. CL 6, 201); he is condemned without the service of a lawyer.

It may be said that at that moment, JBS does not enjoy any longer the trust and esteem of the public authority (because of the court cases) nor of the Church authorities (he is accused before the Archbishop of Paris of being unable to govern the Institute), nor of some of his own Brothers (some of whom would like to impose another type of government of the Institute).

To that must be added the doctrinal quarrels of the period: some wished to get JBS compromised with the Jansenists, others with the Quietists. His inflexibility and firmness to hold on to the Roman Faith cost him the loss of his protectors’ backing in these difficult times.

Hence, the “doubts” referred to by his biographers:

“These doubts are not the pure product of a subjective illusion. They are embedded in a historical pro-

cess in which he notes that his efforts at strengthening the Brothers, by educating them in order to hold together the gratuitous schools, constitutes at present an obstacle for the Society of the Christian schools. He therefore wonders whether his presence is not hindering the development and the growth of God's work. He also asks himself how consistent is his role, we could perhaps say, his personal charism within the community" (M. Campos, *Itinéraire évangélique de S. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle et le recours à l'Écriture dans ses "Méditations pour le temps de la Retraite"*. – *Contribution à l'étude sur les fondements évangéliques de la vie religieuse*, CL 45, p. 296).

This is the situation of JBS at 61 years of age, 33 of which were consecrated to this undertaking of the schools which today seems to rob him of everything, including his reputation. He then left Paris, went to Provence and disappeared in this way from the company of the Brothers. "Events seem to tell him that God no longer wants him among the Brothers" (M. Campos op. cit. p. 299). He feels strongly that he has been forsaken by his friends, his Brothers and by God himself. He had known other difficult situations in the past, but this time his interior confusion was without compare. Let us listen to Blain:

"We have already said many times how attractive was for him the intimate commerce with God... In his sufferings and work, it is there that he looked for solace and rest. But at that time this holy exercise was transformed into a dry and arid land... His soul no longer tasted the divine sweetness... God spoke no longer to him and left him in total darkness" (BLAIN 2. CL 8. p. 96).

All these trials were for JBS a source of spiritual enrichment. From his sufferings, his dereliction and deprivation, he learnt the meaning of obedience. Through the interior darkness and exterior contradiction, he learnt the meaning of the Gospel message: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9,23-23).

He has now experienced the fragility of man. He can convince himself that the setting up of the Society is not HIS doing, but GOD's who alone is able to bring it to fruition. The undertaking is not human, it is divine. In the foundation of the Institute, it is God who is at work, he "who desires that all men be saved" (I Tm 2.4) and who has re-

solved to give them the means to do so. However, he acts in a disconcerting manner sometimes when he upsets men's plans and projects. JBS acknowledges this:

"It is God's normal procedure to upset the designs of men and to allow that the opposite of what they planned, occurs, so that they may learn to trust in him, to abandon themselves entirely to his Providence, and not undertake anything by themselves, because they must plan to do only what he wants" (BLAIN 2, p. 266).

Finally, a single desire guides, directs and determines JBS in all these self-renunciations and deprivations which God imposes on him, the desire to correspond, through faith, to the will of God which is directing him. If he has given up his canonry and his patrimony, if he accepts without an interior rebellion the sacrifice of this satisfaction and of the legitimate joy of seeing his undertaking prosper, it is because he is intimately convinced that he must go through it all, if he is to carry out his God-given task; he will only become a Founder if he does God's will. Like all the Founders, he is "favoured by grace and by tribulations" (A. RAYEZ, *La spiritualité d'abandon chez Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*. *Rivista lasalliana*, Torino, No. 1. mars 1958, p. 15. Extrait de la *Revue d'Ascétique et de mystique*, No. 21, janvier-mars 1955). The spirit of faith — for that is what it is all about — was in JBS born like "a flower and a fruit, the way to and end product of renunciation. Having triumphed over his repugnances, deprived of all, he was free henceforth to carry out the divine pleasure. Nothing would stop him now: no external consideration, no personal consideration. Only God would matter" (id. p. 14).

It is in this perspective that No. 8 of the "*Règles que je me suis imposées*" is to be understood (cf. CL 45, 250-287, specially 255-257):

"I will always consider the task of my salvation and the setting up and management of our community as God's handiwork That is why I will entrust the care of it to him in order to do all that will concern me therein only on his orders, and I will ask much advice regarding all that I will have to do, either for the one, or for the other; and I will often say to him these words of the prophet Habakkuk: Domine, opus tuum" (RI No. 8 in BLAIN 2, 318).

1.4. To empty oneself completely in order to make room for God

Jean Tauler, the Rhine mystic of the 14th century, used to say that there were five sorts of slaveries from which men must free themselves in this world. These are: 1. The love of creatures (living or dead); 2. love for oneself. 3. pride in one's own intellect. 4. the search for spiritual consolations. 5. The slavery of one's own will.² He observed: "Man must reach the age of fifty in order to be given the Holy Spirit who will teach him all the Truth". "If you get out of yourself entirely, God will enter into your soul fully. He will fill the vacuum you will leave, no more, no less" (op. cit., p. 15).

Through successive renunciations, JBS has been led, under God's guidance, to free himself from these "slaveries". Entire trust into God's hands is within his reach, this "presupposes in the soul which possesses this gift, death to self, the extinction of passions, the renunciation to any human interest, indifference to all the events of life and perfect resignation to God's good pleasure". (BLAIN 2, p. 257). Resignation, indifference, trust in providence are like the fruits of renunciation. We can easily recognize here JBS' spiritual kinship with Ignatius of Loyola, Francis de Sales, Jeanne de Chantal, Barré. The Saint's last words sum up perfectly his life and spirituality: "I adore in all things the will of God in my regard".

These words are uttered at the end of a 40 year itinerary fraught, as we have seen, with trials of all sorts. They sound true in the mouth of him who utters them, so much so that...

"Any suffering is good so long as it is seen as a gift from God. Our memories have been told poetically about the benefit of suffering, the grace it conceals: Man is an apprentice, suffering is his master, and no one knows himself so long as he has not suffered. Blessed are you, o Lord, who send us suffering as a divine remedy for our impurities. I know that pain is a unique nobility which earth and hell will never be able to destroy". Suffering is an initiation, it is purifying and formative ("Suffering passes, past suffering does not"), revealing, (Graham Green after Leon Bloy: "There are places in our poor heart where pain must enter if they are to exist"), useful and fruitful like childbirth, medicinal as a step towards a recovery. Whoever has experienced with Kierkegaard a bout of suffering which has led him to examine himself, whoever

has made his apprenticeship under the guidance of this tough and just master, is not willing to curse the day when he was born" (X. TILLETTE, *Sens et non-sens de la douleur*, in *Communio*, XIII, 6 Nov.-Dic. 1988, p. 17).

JBS is an educated, chastened, mature man, whom the experience of pain has cured, who receives the letter of the principal Brothers of Paris, Versailles and Saint-Denis drafted on April 1, 1714, ordering him to "take up once more without any delay the general management of the Society". As soon as he sees in this unforeseen event, a sure manifestation of the will of God expressed through that of the Brothers, he journeys back to Paris and makes himself available to the Brothers on August 10, 1714: "Here I am, what is it that you want me to do?".

Can one imagine a greater example of self-abnegation?

2. WHAT WE LEARN FROM HIS TEACHINGS

Abnegation presupposes a certain spiritual climate. This climate results from the high standard of one's relationship with God. In *Da* (CL 20, p. 422), JBS says that prayer "makes one give up worldly pleasures". Everything depends therefore on one's relationship with God. That is why the Desert Fathers liked to repeat: "Mysticism comes before asceticism".

But, on a practical level, what is the Brother invited to give up? He must give up: the world, the devil and sin, himself, everything. And what for? In order to have only in mind God and the duties of his employment and to live in brotherly communion.

2.1. To renounce the world

"You do not belong to the world" (Jn 15,19).

The teaching of the Founder on giving up the world is to be found principally in his Meditations, especially in those for Feast Days. The examples of abnegation which he finds in the life of the saints provide him with opportunities to draw spiritual lessons for the Brothers.

"Have you given up the world?" It is the question that JBS asks his Brothers incessantly (cf. MF

123,2; 143,1; 174,2 ...). He certainly means to tell them that to be authentically "BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS", a name which they adopted in 1684-1686, and to be able to live up to the ministry which is theirs, the Brothers must "relinquish" the world, that is, become true disciples of Jesus Christ.

In the writings of the Founder, to renounce the world, is a synonym of "to live the spirit of one's own state" "to work with God's will in view" (MD 75.1), "to practise and teach the Gospel maxims, which are diametrically contrary to those of the world. The mission of the Christian educator is that of the guardian angel (cf. MR 197 and 198), and consists in getting children to renounce their past life (lived in the bondage of a worldly spirit) to embrace a new way of life (the freedom of the Gospel), committing themselves to stay on the right path (MR 194-195).

When he addresses himself directly to the Brothers, the Founder shows them that the spirit of the world and "the spirit of their state" are two antinomical spirits; and that makes renunciation to the spirit of the world all the more imperative. This is the message he passed on to them in his last exhortations:

"If you wish to persevere and die in your vocation, never have any intercourse with people of the world; for, little by little, you will acquire a taste for their habits and be drawn into conversation with them to such an extent, that you will no longer be able, through policy, to refrain from applauding their language, however, pernicious it may be; this will lead you into unfaithfulness; and being no longer faithful in observing your Rules, you will grow disgusted with your vocation, and finally you will abandon it" (MARC CL 6, 9.257).

2.2. To renounce the devil and sin

In Db and Dc, JBS exhorts the Brothers to renounce the devil and sin. "To renounce the devil and sin" is the same as to renounce "the pleasures of the senses and of the flesh", according to St. John's own words: "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world" (I Jn2,16). These pleasures are at times called "the pleasures of the world" (Da 422; Dc p. 97), at others "the movements of greed and sen-

suality", "the pleasures of life" (MF 166.1) or "the comforts of life" (MF 186.1)

These pleasures are also "earthly possessions", perishable possessions", earthly things, "worldly things" "wealth and all the things of this world", "satisfactions" or simply "creatures" The soul filling itself with God detaches itself from creatures". To relish God and be loved by the poor, it is necessary to renounce the world" (Cf. MF 86,3).

2.3. To renounce self

Abnegation consists in a permanent battle to detach oneself from the world and its frivolities, the devil and sin, in order not to love the world and all that is contrary to the maxims of the Gospel. Thus the soul becomes receptive to the Spirit. But this receptivity will not be real and complete until the self-renunciation takes place. Self-renunciation renders possible genuine prayer, authentic obedience, the assiduous pursuit of perfection, a more intense life of faith.

2.3.1. Prayer (*Mental Prayer*)

Self-renunciation and prayer are closely linked. In the first part of the *Explication de la méthode d'oraison*, besides other ways in which we can place ourselves in the presence of God, there is the invocation of the spirit of Our Lord, "so that we can make our meditation under his guidance, renouncing for this reason our own mind and our own thoughts" (R II). This same idea is to be found further on in the chapter which deals with living in the presence of God through simple attention:

"It sometimes happens to souls which are interiorly disengaged, or even free from any affection for created things, that God grants them the grace to lose, very rarely, or not to lose at all, the presence of God, which is for them an anticipated happiness and a foretaste of heavenly bliss.

But a soul does not ordinarily enjoy this advantage, To do so it must have kept its innocence throughout its lifetime, or have been for a long time faithful to God; if it has been purified, not only of sin and any affection to the least sins, but has stripped itself of its own inclination and any human pursuit, and has *entirely detached itself from that which pleases the senses and the spirit*; if it has become almost insensitive to all these things, and finally if it has no longer

its own will, but that of God, acting in it as the principle of all its actions; this causes it to have as the sole or almost sole object of its application the presence and action of God" (EM 30-31).

2.3.2. *Obedience*

One of the qualities of obedience is simplicity. It can only be acquired if we renounce "all the thoughts which may invade our mind" to question the reasons for an order we have received or how we are going to carry it out (R 29; MD 13,3). There is no real obedience without self-renunciation.

2.3.3. *The search for perfection*

To search for perfection is to live according to the truths, the precepts and the counsels of the Gospels. For this purpose, it is necessary to "renounce self", that is to renounce "one's spirit and one's will and to carry one's daily cross" (MD 5,3). For perfection demands more than renunciation of exterior things "it is necessary to search for perfection interiorly renouncing our passions and personal inclinations" that is what, for example Saint Anthony did in the wilderness after he had given up everything he possessed (cf. MF 97,2). That is also what a religious who has left the world must do. Self-renunciation (renunciation of one's own will, one's own judgement falsified by sin, one's own inclinations) constitutes the means and the way to become interior.

2.3.4. *The faith*

This renunciation must lead to "a love of sensible privations during spiritual exercises". Note carefully: it does not suffice to accept them, one has to "love them". It is necessary to look for God and to go to him essentially through faith and therefore to be able to forgo what appeals to the senses. The Founder explains why:

1. As sensible consolations are given by God merely as an aid to our weakness, He is at liberty to withdraw them at pleasure and assist us in other ways;
2. Because sensible consolations do not surely lead us to God: faith alone does so without danger of deception.
3. Because, when we become attached to sensible consolations, it is our own satisfaction, and not God's that we seek (R. 61).

JBS is in perfect harmony with tradition. It is as if we heard St. John of the Cross saying that visions and ecstasies are not only secondary but potential obstacles to the spiritual life; or the Jesuit Alphonsus Rodriguez (1533-1617) stating that: "These things (visions and other extraordinary phenomena) pose a threat to humility and are not essential to virtue. They should be dreaded and avoided as much as possible"³ or Theresa of Avila who warned against temptation, in the spiritual life, to attach oneself to consolations of God rather than to look for and desire the God of consolations. Spiritual transports and ecstasies are signs of weakness in the soul.

JBS repeats here, with all the masters of the spiritual life, that the «dark night» of the senses and of the mind which leads to a faith that is pure and unadorned requires self-renunciation; whoever wants to be filled with God and by God, must create a vacuum in himself.

2.4. **To renounce all things**

Through renunciation we aim to give up the world, sin, and ourselves. The Founder adds to this list relatives and persons dearest to us (Cf. Dc 202) as well as honours (cf. Da 175). It has to be pointed out however that on various occasions the Founder does not mention what the precise object of the renunciation or detachment in question is. He uses a radical, an absolute language: it is necessary to give up "all", "everything"; to detach oneself from "everything". That is the type of language one comes across especially in the MF.

Union with God can only be achieved at this price: total renunciation. "God willingly communicates with men when he finds them free from any attachment" writes JBS in Meditation 171.1 for the feast of St. Bartholomew. On the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, he warns: "The more you detach yourself from creatures, the more you will possess God and his holy love. "It is precisely this desire to possess God which urges a soul to detach itself from everything (cf. 200 supra; MD 35.1; MF 125,3).

God finds his delight solely in a poor heart, "detached from anything profane and earthly" (MF 85,3). Poverty, which is unthinkable without detachment, is the foundation of evangelical per-

fection (c. MF 142,1); it is to be found at the origin of the vocation to the religious life (cf. MF 97,1 on St. Anthony; 180.2 on St. Hilarion; 139 on St. Peter, etc)

To give up all, is not only to renounce everything one has, but even the desire to possess anything (cf. MF 139,1). It is faith that renders such a detachment possible, for it is through faith that we can place ourselves under God's sole protection and abandon oneself entirely to Providence through total renunciation: "Detachment from earthly good betokens a lively faith... This detachment of St. Barnabas obtained for him an abundance of faith" (MF 132,2). Faith leads to renunciation, renunciation nourishes and strengthens faith.

2.5. The teacher thinks only of God and of the duties of his employment

Renunciation leads to union with God, a more lively and active faith, a more perfect practice of obedience, a more filial prayer under the influence of the Spirit, a freer pursuit of perfection. It also procures a much more fruitful apostolate.

References to this here would be far too numerous. The content of MF 134 on St. Barnabas and of MF 86 on the Nativity of Our Lord, set the tone.

"We cannot conceive the good that may be realized in the Church by one who is truly detached. This is because detachment from earthly goods betokens a lively faith, for it means that one abandons oneself to God's Providence unreservedly, like a man who would put to sea without sail or oars. Ask God through the intercession of St. Barnabas. for the spirit of disinterestedness which is so necessary in your profession, and have the proper dispositions to obtain it (MF 134,1).

Here again, we come across the teaching of JBS on poverty. In the beautiful meditation on the Birth of Our Lord, he addresses the Brothers in these vigorous and admirable words:

"Rest assured that so long as you have a sincere love of poverty and for all that is humiliating, you will produce fruit in souls; that the angels of God will make you known and will inspire parents to send you their children to teach; by your instructions you will touch the hearts of these poor boys, and that the majority of them will become good

Christians. But, if, on the contrary, you do not resemble Christ at his birth by these two outstanding virtues, you will be little known and little employed; you will be neither loved nor appreciated by the poor, and you will never be for them a saviour, as your profession requires, for you can attract them to God only in so far as you resemble Jesus at his birth" (MF 86,3).

Poverty is therefore not only an ascetic practice, it is also the necessary means which leads to a resemblance with Jesus and with the poor to whom the Brother is sent:

"Total detachment from earthly goods and from the commodities of life is one of the first requisites if we wish to belong wholly to God and to work for the salvation of souls. It was the first thing Jesus demanded of his Apostles, and they, in their turn, inspired the first Christians with it. If then you wish to be worthy to help in the work of saving souls, disentangle yourself from all earthly things, and the grace of God will be poured down upon you in abundance both for yourself and for others. Say with the author of Genesis: 'Give me these living souls; all the rest you may take for yourself'. that is to say, do with the rest as you choose (Gn 14,21). Except for your holy love, everything is indifferent to me" (MF 187.1).

Poverty is therefore, as the Founder says in his meditation for the feast of St. Charles Borromeo, a condition and a guarantee of apostolic fecundity. To be "worthy of working for the salvation of souls», it is necessary to be detached from everything.

2.6. The bond of Brotherly Communion

In his *Mémoire des Commencements*, JBS makes an observation: "Since I have left everything, I have not come across anyone who was tempted to leave the Institute because it did not have a solid foundation". His conviction will not change: "Our Brothers will survive so long as they are poor. They will lose the spirit of their state when they strive to provide themselves with the comforts of life" (MAR p. 69). It is the answer he used to give to people in "high places" who offered him important sums of money to open new schools.

JBS got into the habit of "building" the Institute in one block, striving to give it its own peculiar physiognomy, organising it into a living fra-

ternity thanks to the cohesion of its members and the efforts made by all to live in conformity with the aim of their Society.

Community spirit, indispensable in the Institute, is not to be practised only in the local community (the "house" in the language of the Founder), but in the whole Institute as a Body structured in relation to its finality. "To stand by each together" is to work and live to achieve the strongest possible cohesion for this Body. Consequently, what is at stake in renunciation (and in poverty) is nothing more nor less than the very survival of the Institute. Community spirit, vital to the Institute, will be preserved so long as the Brothers are poor:

"Union in a community is a precious gem. For this reason Our Lord recommended it to his Apostles with insistence before his death. When it is lost, all is lost. Hence, if you wish your community to continue to exist, preserve this virtue carefully" (MF 91.2).

3. CONCLUSION

One must be careful to practise "all that leads to detachment from all created things" (R 67). We now understand why, we know why. The detachment we practise must be such that it will pave the way to the ultimate detachment, death: "We should be always ready for death for this is the effect of detachment from earthly things. We find it

hard to die only because it is painful to leave what we love and the things we are attached to. Resolve, therefore, to imitate the Most Blessed Virgin in her total detachment, ask through her intercession for the grace of a happy death" (MF 156.1).

To sum up, renunciation and detachment, words which evoke identical realities, are other names given to asceticism in the Christian life. The Gospel paradox holds that one must die to live, to detach oneself from something or someone, to attach oneself to something or someone, to destroy what one recognizes in oneself as having the power to kill, to free life (it is the meaning of mortification or mortifications). Such is the language which Jesus uses in the Gospel, it is also that of JBS in his life and in his writings, which, as has been seen, are the faithful echo of his own spiritual experience.

¹ BLAIN I, read the whole of Chapter IX: "In spite of the extreme repugnance which M. de La Salle felt in the depth of his being at the thought of having to live in common with people as uncouth as the schoolmasters over whom he had a certain responsibility, charity persuaded him to draw them closer to him, to watch over them and in the end to admit them into his home".

⁶ Cf. J. TAULER, *Aux amis de Dieu*, Cerf, coll. Foi vivante, 1979, p. 64-66.

³ In Hilda GRAEF, *Histoire de la mystique*, Seuil, 1972, p. 236.

Complementary themes:

Abandonment; Consolations; Conversion; Faith; Fidelity; God's work; Mental prayer; Mortification; Poverty; Prayer; Spirit of the world; Spirit of Christianity; Suffering; Union with God; Union with one's Brothers.

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2. CL 45: see above 1.3.
3. Rayez: see above 1.3.

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