

57. SALVATION

Summary:

1. The word salvation implies a negative element (salvation from) and a positive element (salvation for). In religious terms this means salvation from the human condition of sin and death and salvation for eternal life in union with God. The doctrine that salvation comes from God through Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Christian faith. Although salvation is wrought through God's grace, human effort is required for it to be attained. – 2. In his catechetical writings, De La Salle reflects the traditional Catholic doctrine and the prevalent pessimism about the fate of the vast numbers who seem not to overcome the many obstacles to salvation. – 3. De La Salle urges the Brothers to meditate on their own salvation and to recognize that their ministry is to be cooperators with Jesus Christ for the salvation of those placed under their care. – 4. Although some aspects of De La Salle's treatment of salvation may seem today to be overly legalistic and pessimistic, his fundamental appreciation of the mystery of salvation can still provide powerful motivation for the Lasallian educator today.

1. MEANING OF THE WORD

1.1. To fully appreciate the meaning, or the various meanings, of salvation it is necessary to go to the Latin root *salus*, safety or health, which in turn is based on the verb *salvare*, to save. The concept of saving someone or something always involves two elements, one negative (saving from) and the other positive (saving for). Thus the 17th century dictionary of Richelet equates salvation with preservation (French *conservation*) in examples such as "His salvation consists in getting the jump on his enemy". The same dictionary defines salvation in a religious sense as eternal life. Implied in these definitions is the idea of being saved from some danger, either physical or spiritual. The adjective salutary has the same connotation. Defined as something beneficial or useful to a person, the word implies a distance from a corresponding danger or threat. In French, the word *salut* can mean either salvation or a salute, such as a military salute, whereas in English two different words are used. In French the word *Salut (du Saint-Sacrement)* is also used for what in

English is called Benediction, the French expression related perhaps to the *O Salutaris*, the hymn that opens the ceremony.

1.2. The doctrine of salvation is at the very center of the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition and faith. Rooted in the Old Testament promise by God to save his people, the Christian sees the fulfillment of that promise in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For the Christian, Jesus saves, Jesus is salvation. In theological terms, Christology, the study of who Jesus is, becomes soteriology, the study of the saving work of Jesus, the Christ.

1.3. The need for salvation, the "saving from" aspect is a fundamental condition of human existence. Human beings need to be saved from physical evils associated with sickness and the inevitability of death; from emotional evils associated with frustration and loneliness; from the moral evils associated with sin and moral lapses; from

the social evils of oppression, exploitation, enslavement, war, and violence. Human schemes of salvation, such as advances in medicine and psychology, behavior control, and programs of social reform, can provide partial and temporary solutions, but are unable to satisfy completely the human craving for ultimate fulfillment ("salvation for"), that can be found only in the possession of the ultimate reality we call God.

1.3.1. The root of the problem lies both in the limitations of human creatureliness and the estrangement from God brought about by sin. Human beings, as God's creatures, are unable by human effort alone to bridge the gap that separates from God, from everlasting life in union with God, the only true meaning of salvation. Salvation in this sense comes from God as a grace, a gift, through the redemptive mission of his only Son, Jesus Christ, a redemptive action in which human beings are invited to share.

1.4. The theology of salvation current in the 17th century (and indeed from the middle ages until Vatican II) was dominated by the satisfaction theories of salvation and redemption, derived from Saint Anselm, and congenial to medieval theories of justice and retribution. In this view, since the evil came into the world through human sin, actual and original, an infinite offense against the infinite God, God's rigorous justice demands that the reparation be equal to the offence. Jesus Christ, though himself innocent, took upon himself as man the sins of the race, making satisfaction and atonement to God by his suffering and death. As the divine Son of God, his satisfaction had infinite value, thus equating the satisfaction to the offense. This soteriology found its way into certain aspects of the spirituality of the time, especially in meditations and pulpit oratory on the passion of Jesus and the necessity, motivation, and quality of penitential acts.

1.4.1. Another influence on the salvation theology of the post-Tridentine period was the Catholic polemic against the doctrine of justification by trusting faith alone, as it was espoused by the Protestant reformers of the 16th century. This led to a strong re-emphasis on the necessity, not

only of fiducial faith, but of explicit belief in the revealed mysteries. In addition, the Catholic doctrine stressed the necessity of good works and, conversely, the avoidance of certain acts which, when performed knowingly, constituted mortal sin and so merited damnation; the distinction between mortal and venial sins; the reception of the sacrament of penance for the forgiveness of sin; and all seven sacraments as not only signs but causes of grace. In popular religious language, salvation was described as "saving one's soul" or "going to heaven", damnation as "losing one's soul" or "going to hell" for all eternity.

1.4.2. As the conditions for salvation came to be more and more codified and explicit, the prevalent theological climate in the medieval and post-Tridentine Church was rather pessimistic with regard to the eternal salvation of vast numbers of people in whom the conditions were not met. Among them would be non-Catholics; fallen away Catholics; Catholics guilty of the many kinds of unconfessed and unrepented acts, especially sexual, considered to be mortal sins; Catholics who failed to attend Mass regularly or observe the other "commandments of the Church". It might be said that the major thrust of the Catholic reform inaugurated by the Council of Trent, and the motivation for the Founders of apostolic institutes in the 16th and 17th centuries, was to rescue whole categories of persons from imminent damnation through parish missions for adults, catechetical instruction for the children, missionary efforts for the conversion of non-Catholics at home and pagans in foreign lands.

2. SALVATION IN THE CATECHETICAL WRITINGS OF DE LA SALLE

2.1. De La Salle's references to salvation are for the most part phrased in the traditional doctrinal language of the time in expressions such as "saving one's soul" (CE 151 C, Da 120 B, EM 93 C), "life eternal" (Da ix E, 406 D), "the only true good" (Da 101 A). He presumes that the concern for salvation is present in his readers, sensitive to the risk of eternal damnation as compared to the prospect of eternal happiness with God. At the be-

ginning of the *Duties of a Christian*, De La Salle gives the scriptural definition of eternal life, to know the one true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent. All the truths contained in the catechism can be summarized as the knowledge of what Jesus Christ has done for our salvation (Da 2 A). De La Salle consistently stresses the need to avoid the dangers to salvation and to make use of the means necessary to obtain it. He often links together the idea of procuring God's glory and the salvation of one's soul (MF 108.2, EM 109 A).

2.2. De La Salle reminds his readers that salvation comes from God, that God wills to save all people, that salvation is wrought by God through Jesus Christ (Da 2 A, 60 B, 322 B). For De La Salle, the mystery of the incarnation is nothing less than the mystery of salvation (EM 92 A). Salvation comes, not from human effort alone (Da 193 D, MF 182.3), but as a free gift through grace (Da 194 C). Faith alone without works is not enough (Da 90 A).

2.3. Although salvation is a free gift of God's grace, human beings must cooperate with grace and have recourse to the means of salvation (Da 62 D, 406 E, 410 A). This is the work of a lifetime that God has given us for this purpose (Da 83 B, Db 134 A, GA 382 D). Some means such as Baptism (Da 217 C) are necessary for salvation, others are useful (Db 247 E). Among the necessary means are a knowledge of the truths contained in the gospel (EM 109), baptism (Da 217 C), and the practice of the virtues (EM 94). God's providence has provided us with heavenly helpers to aid us in achieving salvation, notably the Blessed Virgin (Da 467 C) and the angels (Db 29 B). God has also provided that humans can help to conduct others to salvation (Da 21 A, 139 E, 140 A).

2.4. Sharing the pessimism of his time in the presumption that large numbers of people will probably not attain salvation, De La Salle puts great stress on the dangers to salvation. The enemies of our salvation are engaged in a war to turn us away from God, so Christians must arm themselves for the struggle (Da 65 B, 203 D). The three principal enemies of salvation are the world, the devil, and the flesh (Da 233 E, Db 56 B). The devil is

ever active in placing obstacles to our salvation (Da 164 C, 196 D). The dangers to salvation are many, including association with heretics (Da 113 A). Some people despair of their salvation (Da 113 B, Db 127 C), others are seemingly indifferent (Da 155 D, 161 B, 176 E, 181 B), as is evident in those who neglect the practice of prayer (Da 464 A). A person who fails to receive the last sacraments puts his salvation in great danger (Db 226 A). In this rather extensive treatment of the obstacles, De La Salle seems to be providing the children in the schools with the same kind of motivation given by the preachers of his day during the parish missions.

2.5. To balance this apparent negativity with a note of hope, De La Salle returns often to God's will to save, his love for his human creatures. This is especially manifest in the mission of his Son, Jesus Christ, who for our salvation has instituted the sacraments as a means to acquire grace, to preserve it, and increase it (Da 200 D). The Founder notes, for example, that the reason the priest extends his hands over the penitent is to "teach us that by this sacrament the hand of God draws us away from sin and conducts us on the road to salvation" (Da 322 B).

3. SALVATION IN DE LA SALLE'S WRITINGS FOR THE BROTHERS

3.1. In his writings intended for his religious family, De La Salle urges the Brothers to be ever concerned both with their own salvation and that of their students. It is his view, in fact, that the salvation of the Brothers is intimately linked to their work for the salvation of their students. Thus De La Salle invites in "The Rules I have imposed Upon Myself" that "it is a good rule of conduct not to make any distinction between the matters that are proper to one's state in life and the matter of one's salvation and perfection" (BL II, 318).

3.1.1. In the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer*, the duty of the Brothers to be concerned for their own salvation is a recurrent theme. This occurs even in the first part of the mental prayer, where the method describes the various ways to become aware of the presence of

God. Thus, in recalling the presence of Jesus Christ in their midst, the Brothers can find in him the source and assurance of their salvation (EM 9 E). Likewise, the presence of Jesus Christ in the church building is an opportunity "to obtain from him what we ask since he is totally consecrated for our salvation and for all that relates to the good of our soul" (EM 24 C).

3.1.2. One of the possible subjects for meditation in the second part of the prayer is some maxim from the gospel. De La Salle illustrates this option by suggesting a meditation on the importance of salvation. Even the Brothers, he says, are tossed on a tempestuous sea and always in danger of losing their salvation (MF 164.1). For the purpose of meditation, he suggests the passage from Matthew 16, "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul?" In the various acts elicited from meditation on this maxim, the Brother might thank God for teaching us the importance of salvation, he might promise God to prefer his salvation to everything else, he might determine to be more faithful to the spiritual exercises that have been established for his salvation, he might beg pardon for neglecting the things that could procure his salvation, he might become more resolute about contributing to the salvation of others, and renounce anything that might put his salvation in danger (EM 109-121).

3.1.3. In his meditations, the Founder often reminds the Brothers that their ministry is to contribute to the salvation of the children confided to their care. Although this theme runs through all the meditations, it comes to the fore most forcibly in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*. There the Founder tells the Brothers that the responsibility for the salvation of the souls of young people has been entrusted to them by God (MR 205.2). In this they are cooperators with Jesus Christ for the salvation of these souls (MR 195.1, 196.1, 196.2).

3.1.4. The Brothers are destined to procure for their pupils the means of salvation available to them (MR 193.3). This is the meaning of the ministry of the Brothers (MR 193.3) and of their employment (MR 200.2). Young people need vigilant

guides to provide the illumination needed to conduct them on the path to salvation (MR 197.3).

3.1.5. To accomplish this ministry the Brothers must have an ardent zeal for the salvation of their charges (MR 201.1), a zeal that includes affection (201.3, 204.3). To this work they are to apply themselves totally (MR 205.2). The obstacles to the salvation of young people are many (MR 197.3). Grace is needed to contribute to the salvation of others (MR 205.2). The power of Jesus Christ enables the Brothers to overcome all the obstacles in the way of the salvation of their disciples (MR 195.2).

3.1.6. At the judgment, God will require that the brothers render an account of how they have exercised this ministry (MR 206.2). The reward in heaven for those who have procured the salvation of others will be very great (MR 207.1), including the happiness of seeing in heaven so many of their former pupils, who will consider the Brother, after God, as the cause of their salvation (MR 208.2, 208.3).

3.2. In the *Collection*, De La Salle takes again a pessimistic view of the dangers to salvation to be found in the world (R 63.18). On the other hand, the Brothers have left the world to join the Society and so have a greater assurance of salvation for themselves (R 63.22, 184.13), as well as the opportunity to contribute to the salvation of others (R 69.4). Still, it is important for their salvation that they remain faithful to their vocation (R 184.1). Toward the end of his life, when De La Salle was revising the Rule, he penned a remarkable passage, based no doubt on long reflection and experience, in which he states that mere observance of rules, apart from the observance of the two commandments of love for God and love for neighbor, is utterly useless for salvation (RC 37.1).

4. THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF THE LASALLIAN VISION OF SALVATION

4.1. Ever since Vatican II, both the official approach of the Catholic Church to the meaning of

salvation and theological developments in soteriology have undergone considerable change. The essentials of the doctrine, of course, remain: a fact of human existence is the need for salvation rooted somehow in the origins of the race; salvation is a gift from God who wills the salvation of all; God's will to save has become known in a unique way through the revelation of Jesus Christ; salvation is accomplished in some mysterious way through the action of God's grace and human effort; salvation is mediated through the community of the Church and by the action of individuals within it; although there is a connection between salvation in this world and eternal salvation, the full experience of salvation in the ultimate experience of intimate union with God transcends the limits of this world, its achievements for good, and its history; human sin and error is real and consequently the failure to achieve salvation is always a threat and a possibility for humans who consciously opt to find salvation in something less than God.

4.2. In the post-Vatican II era, however, there is less pessimism than there was in the post-Tridentine era about the possibility of the ultimate salvation of the majority of the human race. Soteriology is less concerned with the legalistic satisfaction of divine justice than the divine love whereby God in Christ embraces the world of sin, suffering, and death to bring it to final transformation in resurrection. The conditions for salvation are less ecclesiocentric, less based on church membership, and more Christocentric or even theocentric, based on a relationship however implicit to Christ and to God. Genuine offers of grace and salvific responses in faith and charity are seen to be possibilities, not only in spite of, but also through participation in non-Catholic and non-Christian religious rituals and traditions. Salvation is seen as something to be realized at least partially in this world as well as the next, involv-

ing the whole person, body and soul, and not merely the "salvation of the soul" alone. The mortal sin that impedes salvation is tied less to isolated seriously wrong acts and more to a negative fundamental option, an enduring and transcendent choice rooted in a fundamental negative attitude toward God, the neighbor, oneself and the world. Finally, although eternal judgment and damnation remain as a threat, some theologians are unwilling to reject out of hand the possibility of eventual and eternal salvation for all of God's human creation.

4.3. In the light of contemporary religious thought, some of De La Salle's pessimism with regard to the possibility of salvation of wayward youth, his stress on the dangers and obstacles to salvation, his insistence on explicit instruction on the Christian mysteries and the details of church observance as conditions for salvation, and his exclusively Roman church perspective, can all strike a modern reader as anachronistic.

4.3.1. On the other hand, the fundamental thrust of De La Salle's teaching on salvation can serve to motivate the ministry of Lasallian educators today. In his writings, De La Salle is sensitive to the needs especially of the poor for some form of salvation in this world. His concern and that of the Brothers for the salvation of their students is genuine and motivated by disinterested love. His entire educational enterprise was aimed at eliminating an environment of ignorance and hopelessness that was a threat to salvation in any form. Above all, he recognized that the divine plan of salvation was indeed a mystery, a mystery worthy of contemplation, a mystery revealed too great for any human attempt to penetrate fully its depths (EM 92 A), a mystery revealed in the astounding fact that God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten Son not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him (Jn 3, 16-17).

Complementary themes:

Conduct; Consecration; Ministry; Mission; Mystery.

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Bro. Luke SALM, FSC