

# 58. SILENCE

## **Summary:**

1. The word SILENCE in the 17th century and in St. John Baptist de La Salle. – 2. Ascetic value of silence. 2.1. Exterior and interior silence. 2.2. Silence and a life of prayer. – 3. Silence in community life. 3.1. Silence and regularity. 3.2. Silence and interpersonal relations. – 4. Silence in school life. 4.1. The Teacher's silence. 4.2. The pupils' silence.

## **1. THE WORD SILENCE IN THE 17th CENTURY AND IN ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE**

In the 17th century, the word SILENCE has three essential meanings. These are shown in the Trevoux Dictionary (1721):

### **1.1. In the current sense of "To refrain from speaking"**

"It means discretion, restraint in speech, not to speak or to say what one does not dare or that which one wishes to hide".

### **1.2. To signify an order of the Rule:**

It is a characteristic of religious circles: "among religious, it refers to a rule which consists in refraining from speaking together at certain hours. Silence must be strictly observed".

### **1.3. In a figurative sense, it refers to an interior attitude**

Involving control over one's personal thoughts: "thus we say: the silence of passions, to signify a state opposed to the turmoil into which passions plunge us and which prevents us from making a right assessment of things. An interior

silence is a recollection of all our faculties to make them better able to meditate on holy things".

In the writings and the teaching of St. John Baptist de La Salle, the concept of silence recurs frequently in these three senses quite common in the 17th century. He encourages, recommends or prescribes silence, either on a personal level, as an important ascetic value and virtue; on a community level, as a fundamental rule of behavior; or on a school level, as a means to obtain good order and pedagogical efficiency in school work. These three levels sum up the three aspects of silence we would like to go into here.

## **2. ASCETIC PERSONAL VALUE OF SILENCE**

### **2.1. Exterior and interior silence**

For La Salle, "recollection", "retreat", "solitude" or "the flight from the world and from things" constitute first-class values in the spiritual and ascetic growth of the Christian and, in particular, of the religious.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, silence constitutes the condition and the effect: in fact, on the one hand, without silence it is impossible to live deeply absorbed in the presence of God; on the other, silence is a proof and the unequivocal result of an intense interior life and

an assiduous vigilance on one's own passion and on nature's uncontrolled tendencies.

"You should control your tongue. This will facilitate recollection and enable you to preserve God's holy presence. It will also be an excellent means of making you keep silence, and in maintaining regularity, the exact fulfilment of your spiritual exercises, the observance of the Rule, moderation, calm and peace. Such great advantages should induce you to refrain from too great liberty of speech" (MF 126,3).

On this point, what St. La Salle states in the *Collection* is significant: "Hold silence in great esteem and observe it willingly, for it is the guardian of all virtues and an obstacle to all vices, since it prevents detraction, uncharitable, untruthful, and unbecoming language. It is the means of keeping us occupied only with necessary things, and of preventing the distractions which follow frivolous conversations and useless words" (R 78-79).

To be silent and to practice silence is what we are recommended to do in a series of ascetic and spiritual considerations. But exterior silence is insufficient. In fact, the same text goes on: "Strive always to unite interior with exterior silence. Forget created things to think only of God and His holy presence, with whom you should endeavour always to converse interiorly" (R 79).

As we can see, in the first place, the Founder considers silence a factor of exterior good order and of a regular life only in relation to spiritual growth and interior life. On the same page of the *Collection*, he mentions in reality another important aspect of this viewpoint: "Often reflect that he who is not reserved in speech, cannot become spiritual, and that a sure means of attaining perfection rapidly, is to avoid sins of the tongue" (R 79).

Silence represents one of the clearest and most valuable manifestations of self-mastery, strongly stressed by De La Salle as an essential condition of the spiritual life. Referring to the model set by St. Francis de Sales, he gives this advice:

"Learn from this saint to overcome your passions. Never allow emotion to appear in your words or actions. Humility will greatly help you to attain this end, as also silence on these occasions when people give offence" (MF 101.2).

Similarly, having related the example of St. Peter, Martyr, silent victim of a calumny, he goes on:

"Are you so silent when reprimanded for faults of which you are not guilty? What you should do on such occasions, but what you probably fail to carry out, is to say nothing in your own defence, but to endeavor to profit by the humiliation" (MF 117.2).

Letter 128 addressed to a female religious<sup>2</sup> constitutes a sort of small treatise on silence, its spiritual advantages and the most efficacious means to practice it. Here are the main passages:

"Now is the time for little speech and much action. Let your aim be to become silent and very humble and to apply yourself very much to prayer, for this is what God wants of you.

"You will find a very useful, even a very necessary virtue, if you are to adore God, serve him in spirit and in truth, resist temptations, and save yourself from falling into sin.

"You must learn how to be silent, to conceal your feelings and to speak only when necessary. So that you may not fall into the habit of excessive talking, try to observe strictly the following rules:

Do not speak at all outside recreation time unless the need is urgent, and even during recreation speak but little. The present state of your soul demands that you be faithful to this. And you must not even make a single comment about what goes on, remembering, however, that your silence must not spring from pride.

Take care never to justify yourself, but, on the contrary, admit that you were wrong, without of course telling an untruth. If you cannot speak without justifying yourself, remain completely silent. I do not see that you ever have any reason to justify yourself.

Always remain silent when others annoy you, and let God alone be the witness of your innocence".

In the same way, when he suggests an ascetic fasting project at the beginning of Lent, he puts it in concrete form when he suggests the more difficult and efficacious fast of "the eyes, the tongue and the heart":

"You will fast with the eyes by a great recollection, and separation from all that can distract you; with the tongue by means of exact silence, which will allow you to disengage yourself from creatures in order to attach yourself to God during this holy season; and with the heart by a complete renunciation

of vain thoughts, which might distract you and interrupt your communings with God.  
 “The fruit of a Christian fast is the mortification of one’s senses and of one’s evil inclinations, and detachment from creatures” (MD 16.2).

## 2.2. Silence and prayer life

Within the framework of the ascetic value of silence, La Salle underlines strongly the close relationship that exists between silence and a life of prayer, understood especially as an exercise in mental prayer. Not only because it predisposes in a natural way for the practice of the presence of God and prayer, but also because silence is in a more particular way an integrating element of prayer.

In its first meaning, silence is understood as an important aspect of recollection and of the interior attitude of freedom with regard to exterior things; this renders possible the meeting with God. And consequently as an essential condition to be able to pray.<sup>3</sup> Among the many texts which dwell on this idea, an eloquent synthesis is offered us in Letter 103:<sup>4</sup>

“The greatest good you can procure yourself is recollection, and when you have achieved it, you can say what Solomon said, that all good things have come to you with it.

Curiosity is one of the greatest obstacles to growth in piety. Therefore, you must be on your guard against it; and above all else, try to be recollected and aware of the presence of God, for in this we have the surest means of becoming interior. Come now, for the love of God, make the effort.

You know the harm thoughtless behavior does you. So, control your eyes and your tongue for this reason. There is nothing so important for you as this.

In this way you will make your spiritual exercises with God in mind and will learn to make them well both interiorly and exteriorly. God, you see, not only wants your actions done well outwardly; he wants them also to be carried out with the right interior dispositions...”

As a matter of fact, silence constitutes the atmosphere most conducive to an intimate meeting with God. A very clear idea when referred to the experience of St. Catherine of Siena:

“When she was being ill-treated and humiliated by her parents, she was able to converse interiorly with God, and to console herself in his holy company.

During the period of her absolute silence, she was visited by Our Lord, who conversed familiarly with her” (MF 118,3).

In the second meaning, we are dealing with a peculiar aspect of interior silence experienced in the practice of prayer and the meeting with God. It would take up a whole chapter and so here we will simply allude to it. A prayer which has attained a certain depth, does not need so many words and so much reasoning:

“When we begin to experience some facility in making reflections on these Acts, it is advisable to use fewer words in these reflections, and then to dwell on them for some time in an interior silence, so that we strive to imbue our minds with the reflection we are making in a more interior way, for the great number of interior words used in our Mental Prayer serves rather to dissipate the mind, to embarrass the depth of the Soul, than to provide her with diligence towards and attention to God and to render her interior” (EM 44).

That becomes possible for whoever has reached a certain degree of interior life, the signs of which are very clear for La Salle:

“This behavior is easy for those who are truly interior, who walk as much as possible in God’s presence; who are always very recollected in the use of the eyes and the mind; who observe silence exactly, who mind their own business, and who are trained in the practice of obedience” (EM 123).

This interior silence experienced in prayer represents an exercise of great formative value and becomes also a source of continuity in one’s attitude in daily life. Similarly, the “*devoirs d’un Chrétien*” stress this type of silence. “The spirit hides itself in a deep silence” (Da 473); “to dwell before him in intense recollection and deep silence” (Dc 190) are expressions which describe a fundamental spiritual attitude towards what has been experienced interiorly.

## 3. SILENCE IN COMMUNITY LIFE

One of the “ten commandments proper to the Brothers of the Christian Schools” stipulates:

“Keep the rule of silence strictly” (RC67; R 5).

This is one of the basic principles on which community life is built and one which the Founder recalls vigorously and frequently. The Letters<sup>6</sup> often use it as a subject of precise and firm, even sad, exhortations: "Practice exact silence, for the love of God; It is one of the main points of regularity" (L 11.7). "Watch, I beg of you, over silence in your house" (L 36.9-12-19; 56.3). The reason why La Salle insists so much on silence in community, besides those already pointed out in the preceding paragraph, are of various types, but they all aim at the realization of a religious atmosphere impregnated with the presence of God and in which one may experience a genuine interior growth, through regularity, charity, recollection and the proper use of time. Let us reflect on the two most important of these.

### 3.1. Silence facilitates Regularity

"Please take care to be exact in regard to silence. It is one of the most important means of keeping a community faithful to the Rule" (L. 52.6; 12.23). Chapter XXII of the Common Rules<sup>7</sup> is explicitly consecrated to silence and describes in minute detail this aspect of community life, restricting the time when one is allowed to speak to recreation time (RC XXII, 1; R. 78). All the other cases are to be settled by Brother Director and are subject to precise restrictions. The Rule stipulates also that "they shall keep silence most rigorously from the time of retiring at night until after Mental Prayer next morning; they shall not speak even to the Brother Director during this time, without an absolute necessity" (RC XXII 14). It stipulates that the Brother Director should watch particularly over this aspect of regularity. "He will watch so well that all keep silence in and out of the house, that he will note even a word uttered without permission" (RD 157). In fact, many of the texts that have been quoted because they reflect a personal ascetic aspect may also be viewed from a community perspective which La Salle never loses sight of. Considering his insistence on silence, there is a touch of irony in what he writes to a Brother:

"I am at a loss to know why there is so little order in your community, my very dear Brother. Is it not because you do not keep silence? Examine

yourself on this point. Complaints are made that you speak too loudly.

Be careful, then, to keep silence strictly. You know very well that silence and recollection are two means of becoming interior..." (L 73.1.3).

On the 31 December, in the examen of conscience suggested to the Brothers on the practice of regularity throughout the year, silence takes pride of place: "Have you observed silence strictly? This is the first means of establishing regularity in a community, and it is useless to expect to have order in a religious house without it" (MF 92.1). Naturally, what is required in community applies also outside the house, especially in the streets:

"You should, moreover, keep silence in the streets and say your beads, as the Rule prescribes, in order not to be distracted by the numerous things which strike the eye, and so as to keep the holy presence of God in mind. Patience and silence are particularly necessary when anything injurious and insulting is said to you, and whenever you hear anything likely to give offence" (MF 92.2).

### 3.2. Silence upholds good interpersonal relationships

In this sense, the principal aspect to underline would naturally be positive: How to establish good communications with one's Brothers? La Salle pays great attention to this.<sup>8</sup> However, the negative aspect, which interests us here, is no less important, for it is the prerequisite and the condition of it, according to the succinct and clear principle enunciated by La Salle himself: "You may take it as certain that it is in retreat and in silence that we learn to speak best. The greater your love for this, the more competent you will become to fulfill the duties of your ministry in regard to your neighbor" (MF 135.1). In fact, it is silence that safeguards good reciprocal relations, favors discretion and respect, inside the community and between communities; it sustains charity... In this regard, the wise norms of the Rule are a proof of great wisdom, either in the case of internal community relationships (RC XXII 3.4.11) or of external ones (RC XIV 7).

To speak more than is necessary is never good: "Don't stand around talking to the Brothers so

much, I beg you. Unless you take care, you will fritter away the time of the spiritual exercises talking to them, and that just must not happen... Do not speak on the way to recreation nor on the stairs when going about the house" (L 37.9). The principle enunciated in RB<sup>9</sup> is certainly applicable to this context:

"Those who have nothing to relate except gossip and frivolous, silly stories, and those who affect introductions so long that nobody else can speak, would do much better to keep quiet. It is far better to gain a reputation for being a person of few words than to bore people with nonsense and stupidities or always to have something to say (RB 245).

Particularly when charity has to be defended: "Take care never to get into arguments with anybody, for in doing so you can offend against charity, which should be outstanding among you" (L. 73.8).

#### 4. SILENCE DURING SCHOOL TIME

In the Lasallian school, silence takes on a great importance and is amply exploited for its rich pedagogical and educational value. These values are considered under various aspects to be intimately related to each other. We will combine them under two main headings:

##### 4.1. The silence of the teacher

The Rule is categorical regarding the need to make of silence a characteristic of school life; that of the teacher is the first and necessary condition:

"Silence, being one of the principal means of establishing and maintaining order in school, the Brothers shall look upon its exact observance as one of their principal rules; to bring themselves to this exactness, they should frequently call to mind that it would be of little use to try to have their pupils observe silence, if they themselves were not faithful in this respect. For this purpose they shall be very attentive always to employ the signs in use in schools. They will be particularly careful not to speak irrelevantly in class; do so when it is absolutely necessary and when it cannot be done by sign language. That is why they will speak only on three occasions: 1st, to correct the pupils during lessons, when necessary and when no pupil is able to do so; 2nd, during the Catechism; 3rd, during the Reflections which each

Brother should make during morning and evening prayers and then they will speak in a moderate tone" (RC. IX, 10-11).<sup>10</sup>

The Conduct of Schools repeats constantly such principles, applies their practical conclusions and puts to the best use their multiple advantages.<sup>11</sup>

In concrete terms, the teacher's silence:

\* Promotes an atmosphere of order and intense activity in the schools: "His silence will produce more than anything else a very strict order in the school, by giving him the means to watch over himself and over his pupils" (CE 124). "To avoid frequent punishments, which are a source of great disorder in a school, it is necessary to note well that it is silence, restraint, watchfulness on the part of the teacher that establish and maintain good order in a class, and not harshness and blows" (CE 149-150).

\* It is a mark of self-discipline, self-mastery, skill in controlling oneself. It is not without reason that silence is included among "the twelve virtues of a good teacher"<sup>12</sup> (CE 228, R 6).

\* It is an example of great value for the behavior of the pupils who are not only asked to keep silent, but who see it practiced at all times, from the start of the school day: "After the teachers have taken their places... they will remain silent to set an example for the pupils, controlling everything that goes on in the school in order to insure good discipline" (CE 6). In fact, "it would be of little use for the Master to exact silence from his pupils, if he were not silent himself; that is why he will teach them better this practice by his example rather than by his words" (CE 124). Meditation 33 states the same thing very strongly:

"If you wish your pupils to practice virtue, do so yourself. You will lead them to it far more easily by giving them the example of a wise and reserved conduct, than by anything you can say. If you wish your pupils to be silent, be silent yourself. Similarly you will make them pious and modest if you show yourself to be such" (MD 33.2).

\* It enhances the teacher's authority much better than the multiplication of words or disciplinary measures: "They must convince themselves that authority is acquired and maintained more easily by means of firmness, gravity and silence, than by blows and harshness" (CE 186).

For all these reasons, and for others of a practical nature on which it is not necessary to dwell (for example, to avoid teacher excessive fatigue in a classroom that is overcrowded and stuffy...) the teacher's training to maintain silence was one of the fundamental elements in the formation of the new Teachers:

"So much so that in the text *Formation des nouveaux maîtres*, it is specified that the first thing to be learnt by those who are training to become teachers is that of speaking! Through an exercise in progressive self-mastery and to experience the efficacy of silence, the new Teachers learn not to use their voice at all during a quarter of an hour, then half an hour, and finally a whole hour. When they are able to do that, they will show that they are sufficiently able to remain calm and masters of themselves".<sup>13</sup>

#### 4.1. The silence of the pupils

Not only do the Common Rules order us to keep silent, they also urge us strongly to ask our pupils to do likewise:

"They will continually pay attention to three things in the school... 3) to make the pupils keep silent during all the time they are in school" (RC VII, 2). The Conduct of Schools, in its turn, abounds in information and directions aiming at insuring that silence reigns in the school. Many means are used "to avoid disturbing the silence which must be continuous in the school" (CE 123). The silence which is demanded and imposed on the pupils, just as that of the teacher, depends on values which need to be safeguarded. It is these rather than the silence itself that La Salle had at heart. The most important of these are:

\* Without an appropriate silence, it would be impossible to acquire the application needed to insure a genuine apprenticeship: "Silence is one of the principal means of establishing and maintaining order in schools. For this reason, every teacher will see that it is rigorously kept in his classroom and will permit no one to speak without permission" (CE 122). School work is so important for the future of the pupils, that it is necessary to avoid any loss of time and to draw maximum profit from the possibility to work efficiently. It is a gift of God that must not be squandered. For that reason, La Salle wants the pupils to understand the value of silence as an expression of the will of

God who calls them to apply themselves to their class work. "To this effect, the teacher will make the pupils understand that they must keep silent, not because he is present, but because God sees them and it is his Holy will" (CE 122).

\* The Lasallian school is a school of ACTING rather than of SPEAKING. Apprenticeship through practical exercises is very important, whether it is a question of reading, writing or arithmetic. Silence insures that work is seriously done: "In order to acquit himself well of his duties, the teacher must be trained to do three things simultaneously: 1st, To watch over all his pupils to encourage them to do their duty and maintain order and silence..." (CE 19).

"It is therefore not a question of looking at silence negatively, as a prohibition, but rather as an exercise in self-discipline which safeguards work, calm, precision, the full valorization of time. Silence means to speak when necessary, to avoid confusion, to apply oneself seriously. As has already been stated, a whole system of pedagogical means is set in motion to make sure that the work carried out in the school is orderly, precise, efficiently done: the use of the *signal*, the numerous *duties* entrusted to the pupils who know what they should do and how to go about it without causing any disorder or confusion, the precise rules governing moves from class to class, changes of occupation, etc."<sup>14</sup>

It is therefore not silence for its own sake.

Were the opposite to happen, the efficiency of the teaching would be put in jeopardy and a certain dislike for the school would be brought about. In fact, among the reasons which explain pupils' absences, carefully analyzed in the Conduct of Schools, we find this third position: "The third reason why pupils absent themselves is because they acquire a distaste for school. This may be due to the fact that they have a new teacher who is not sufficiently trained and does not know how to conduct himself in a school, but at once resorts to punishments, or because he is too lax and has no order or silence in his classroom" (CE 184-185).

#### CONCLUSION

As has been brought out in these rapid sur-

veys, La Salle, when dealing with silence, acting in perfect coherence with his practical and realistic character, does not consider so much its intrinsic value but rather silence as a means to an end. The end is the very substance of his discourse:

Whether he examines it from the ascetic viewpoint, where silence is a condition of contact with God and of meeting him in prayer or from the community angle, where he sees in it a means at the service of regularity and good interpersonal relationships or even more so when he deals with it from a pedagogical and scholastic aspect, in which it is an essential condition that prevents all the teacher's educational efforts from coming to nothing.

<sup>1</sup> It is a vast chapter on Lasallian spirituality in which one must also include the theme of silence. Cf. M. Sauvage and M. Campos: *Annoncer l'Évangile aux pauvres*, pp. 164-174 and 178-189. See also, Clément-Marcel, FSC: *Par le mouvement de l'Esprit*, 105-127 and Alphonse, FSC: *A l'école de St. Jean Baptiste de La Salle*, pp. 143-188.

<sup>2</sup> The Letters of St. John Baptist de La Salle, Edition critique by Bro. Felix-Paul. Paris 1954, p. 402-403. The text is repeated in Blain 2, p. 276. It is important to note that Blain refers to the silence of De La Salle in the chapter on charity, under the title: "Première marque de l'éminente charité de M. de La Salle: son goût de Dieu et des choses de Dieu" and particularly in the paragraph "the powerful love M. de La Salle for solitude, the hidden life and silence".

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Frédién-Charles, FSC: *L'oraison d'après St. Jean Baptiste de La Salle*, Ligel, Paris 1954, p. 29 etc... and M. Sauvage-M. Campos: *Cahier lasallien 50*, Rome, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> The Letters..., o.c., p. 362 and Blain 2, p. 313.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. EM 72-73: "Entretien par simple attention", see *Cahier lasallien 50*, p. 138-148.

<sup>6</sup> The Letters, o.c.: *Les Lettres* of La Salle are normally

replies to those which were sent to him every month by the Brothers to render an account of their life and conduct. The frequent allusions to silence show that it was a matter which deeply affected the community.

<sup>7</sup> RC 75-77. The reference is to the Rule of 1718. Obviously, the texts quoted in this chapter on silence are tied up with those contained in other chapters (in particular III, V, VI, IX) in which are to be found suggestions on the manner in which one should behave in various places and circumstances. Reference to silence is also to be found in these texts.

<sup>8</sup> Starting with the importance given to the subject of recreations (RC VI; R. 77-78). Among the Meditations, MD 30 is particularly important: "Of the manner in which conversations should be conducted" An attentive analysis of this text has been carried out by Antonio Temprado FSC in *La Parole selon La Salle* (Sinite, Salamanca 1977) p. 163-184.

<sup>9</sup> La Salle: *Règles de la Bienséance et de la Civilité Chrétienne*, Troyes, 1703, cf. CL 19.

In this text, silence is viewed as a rule of prudence which governs social relations. p. 174, 194, 202, 207.

<sup>10</sup> On the topic dealing with silence in school, cf. Saturnino Gallego: *San Juan Bautista de La Salle*, Vol. 1, BAC Madrid 1986, p. 343-344. Mario Presciuttini: *La Scuola Lasalliana come ambiente educativo*, In *Rivista Lasalliana*, 4/1989, p. 3-17; 2/1990, p. 118-135 (in particular for "le système des communications verbales", p. 134-135).

<sup>11</sup> In the Lasallian world, in the Conduct of Schools, ATTENTION is given pride of place. The *Rivista Lasalliana*, makes itself the interpreter of this new interest. Cf. No. 1, 2, 3, 12. Contributions by A. Barella and S. Scaglione.

<sup>12</sup> The "Twelve virtues of a Good Master": gravity, silence, zeal, vigilance, piety, patience, restraint, gentleness, enumeration, Brother Superior General Agathon. Starting with this a famous little treatise entitled precisely: *Les douze vertus d'un bon maître*. This topic was recently brought up-to-date in the *Rivista Lasalliana* by Aldo Barella, 3/1987, p. 3-15.

<sup>13</sup> Mario Presciuttini, *Rivista Lasalliana* 2/1990, p. 1345. The text "Formation des nouveaux maîtres" is published in the edition of the Conduct of Schools by Brother Anselme. Paris, 1951, p. 305-319. See especially page 306.

<sup>14</sup> Mario Presciuttini: *Rivista Lasalliana* 4/1991, p. 11 and the notes.

### Complementary themes:

Contemplation; Conversations; Detachment; Mortification; Renunciation; Retreat; The School; The World; Solitude.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. ALPHONSE, FSC: *A l'école de saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*. 1952.
2. CLÉMENT-MARCEL, FSC: *Par le mouvement de l'Esprit*, 1952.
3. FRÉDIEN-CHARLES, FSC: *L'oraison d'après saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, 1954.
4. Saturnino GALLEGO, FSC: *San Juan Bautista de La Salle*, 1. BAC, Madrid 1986.
5. Bro. Michel SAUVAGE and Miguel CAMPOS, FSC: *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell. Romeoville 1981.
6. CL 50.
7. Secondino SCAGLIONE, FSC: *Proposta educativa*, Marietti, 1983.
8. Antonio TEMPRADO, FSC: *La «Palabra» según La Salle*, Sinite, 1977.
9. *Rivista Lasalliana*, Torino, 1989-90-91.

Bro. Mario PRESCIUTTINI  
*Translated by Bro. James CALLEJA*