

60. SOLITUDE

Summary:

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1. THE MEANING AND USE OF THE WORD

De La Salle makes use of the word “solitude” 25 times once in both MD and R and the rest in MF. In his time the word signified “a desert place or a place which was uninhabited or separated from the world”. It also had the sense of “being alone, separating oneself from contact with people” as well as indicating places which had previously been popular, or much-frequented, but which were now scarcely populated (cf. FURETIÈRE, *Dictionnaire Universel*, “Solitude”). It is with the sense of the first two of these meanings that De La Salle makes use of the word.

Moreover, in analyzing his use of the word “desert” one notices that there is a very close connection between it and “solitude” so that on many occasions De La Salle uses the two words interchangeably. However, there are other occasions in which the word “desert” carries specific connotations and consequently such usage does not permit

this interchange. He uses the word “desert” 39 times in the following works – Da (4), Db (8), EM (2), GA (3), MD (7), MD (19). The word “solitude” also has a close relationship with the word retreat (“retraite”) which is used 93 times by De La Salle usually in a broader and more general sense than “solitude”. Occasionally, he uses all three terms interchangeably — or at least two of them — as can be seen in the following example:

“...This saint (Peter Celestin) thought of nothing else but his “desert” and longed to continue his “recollected” life (“retraite”)... The responsibilities which he had to bear... forced him to live in a way which was diametrically opposed to the inclination for “solitude” which he had felt from his infancy...” (MF 127,3).

“St. Anthony, already filled with the spirit of God in the “desert” ...His zeal for his own sanctification had retained him in the desert... Once the persecution had passed he returned to the “desert”... You must act in a similar way — you must love “recollected”...” (MF 97,3; cf. MF 105,1).

2. THE SENSE AND THE MEANING WHICH DE LA SALLE GIVES TO SOLITUDE

2.1. "Solitude" as an option of some Saints

"Solitude" is the word particular to MF which can be seen as the "biographies of sanctity". De La Salle describes solitude as the option particular to some saints such as, for example: St. Jerome (MD 1,3; MF 170,1.2); St. Anthony (MF 97,3); St. John Chrysostom (MF 100,1.2); St. Romuald (MF 105,1.3); St. Benedict (MF 111,1); St. Gregory Nazianzen (MF 126,1); St. Peter Celestin (MF 127,1.3); St. Basil (MF 170,1.2); St. Remigius (MF 171,1.2.3); St. Bruno (MF 174,2); St. Hilarion (MF 180,2); St. Severus (MF 103,2); St. Romanus (MF 181,3).

De La Salle greatly valued this option for solitude and saw it as eminently sensible and, consequently, this focus on the lives of the saints was his starting point in recommending a life of solitude and recollection to the Brother. He had no fear of taking for such a starting point situations or types which were at times very different from those which were encountered in the life of the Brother. His interest was centred beyond the superficial facts on the value of the option for solitude, emphasizing what was entailed in the option along with the fruits which could be derived; and he recommended it to the Brothers.

The type of saint presented with reference to solitude is varied. For example, St. Peter Celestin "...was attracted to solitude from his youth» (MF 127,1.3) – the text actually says "from his infancy"). In other examples it stems from an option arising from different circumstances. Thus, for example, in the case of St. Jerome, who dedicated much time to the study and the interpretation of Sacred Scripture, it was the advice of St. Gregory Nazianzen which prompted him to "retire to the Syrian desert" in order to "give himself to a holy and penitent life in that solitude" (MF 170,1.2) and thus to "grow old in solitude and in the practice of all kinds of austerities" (MD 1,3). St. Romuald lived a very long time in solitude (100 years!) from the age of 20 (MF 105). In the case of St. Basil it was the pious education and instruction received from his grandfather which made such an impression on him that he "renounced the world

for ever to take refuge in solitude" (MF 136,1). With regard to St. Hilarion, it was the example of St. Anthony, who had already attracted fame, which prompted Hilarion to go in search of him so as to learn about his style of life; the power of the word of Jesus inviting to renunciation, along with the death of his parents when he was 15, led him to lead a solitary life (MF 180,1.2).

2.2. The dynamic aspect of solitude

The option for solitude does not stem from a sort of selfish "flight" from the harshness of life. It is not a question of distancing oneself from the concerns of the world (MF 105) out of some sort of irresponsibility or desire to be uninvolved. On the contrary, it is the result of a search for a series of factors which are conducive to a particular environment. But there is more to it than this since these factors are not automatically effective. They require appropriate dynamisms without which the positive results of solitude cannot emerge. The justification of solitude and its positive value lies in the fruits which it is called to produce.

A close reading of De La Salle's writings will indicate that solitude is something which is not sought for itself as a sort of narcissistic solipsism. One is drawn to solitude for something which is beyond it in itself. De La Salle speaks of solitude as something that could be described as a "learning for" or "preparation". Moreover, it is a "strategy" or a "process" which involves particular practices or work. In more personalized terms, one could say that solitude is a step towards, or a condition for, an *encounter*. One can see this with the help of De La Salle's own texts.

2.3. Solitude as a way to self-knowledge

This particular aspect is affirmed by De La Salle in only one text but it is full of interest since the introspective function facilitated by solitude is described in it. He comments that St. Anthony, "once he had disposed of his wealth in favour of the poor, retired to the desert where he worked with his hands to earn what enabled him to live and to help the poor" and that "continuous prayer was added to work". He then adds:

“... In order to consecrate yourself to God it is not sufficient to detach yourself from all that you had and to renounce everything exterior; it is also necessary to strive for perfection and to uproot passions and your own evil inclinations. It is in recollection where this good is achieved. Indeed it is impossible to overcome yourself without self-knowledge and it is extremely difficult to acquire this in the world” (MF 97,2).

In this passage De La Salle concisely sketches the process involved in surrendering oneself to God. In the first place it involves renunciation and detachment from everything exterior. This is followed by the work of interior perfection and the uprooting of passions and one's own inclinations. However, control of oneself requires self-knowledge which is something almost impossible to attain in the world. In contrast, solitude and recollection provide an appropriate environment to accomplish this.

2.4. Solitude as a means of encountering God

In themes such as “the world and relations with it”, “retreat”-“recollection” or “solitude”, it appears, at first glance, that De La Salle makes use of the language of negation. However, on closer scrutiny, one can see that his message accentuates the centrality of God and that everything else is viewed from this perspective. Thus, for example, if he insists on “separating oneself from creatures”, in reality he is insisting on the positive teaching of situating God as the centre of one's life and, in consequence, viewing everything from this new perspective. We can see this with reference to solitude. Speaking of St. Hilarion's total gift to God, he indicates that the saint was prompted to give himself completely to God by the example of St. Anthony. “He was also moved to give himself completely to God by being profoundly touched by the word of Jesus Christ in the Gospel” (alluding to Lk 14,33). De La Salle then comments:

“...What happiness it would be if this divine word so penetrated your heart that you no longer had attachment for any creature!... Nothing contributes more to obtaining this than solitude since in preventing one from seeking anything other than God it forces one to empty one's heart of all affection for what is created in order that it may be filled comple-

tely by God...” (MF 180,2).

In reality it refers to being “disciples of Jesus” (LK 14,33). What is important for De La Salle is that God completely fills the heart and that solitude is a means of achieving this. The goal and the fruit of solitude is the centrality of God. He explains it even better with reference to St. Remigius, Archbishop of Rheims:

“... It is in solitude or complete separation from creatures that you learn to detach yourself from all that is attractive to worldly people and to lose the taste for it and, in consequence, to converse with God who takes great delight in communicating himself with those who have detached themselves from everything since he delights in speaking one to one. The more one's heart is emptied of earthly attractions the more he makes himself known to them and fills them with his spirit...” (MF 171,1).

Such texts are not comforting. De La Salle presents God in opposition not only to “all that is attractive to worldly people” (something which may be easily understood – cf. his impression of those who are dominated by the spirit of the world) but also with respect to “everything created” which, while it may be justified in the context of his time, goes against our modern sensibilities and requires a degree of nuancing. However, from De La Salle's perspective, it is a text which clearly expresses his thought — solitude facilitates knowledge of God and an encounter with Him which involves a one-to-one conversation and the filling of one's being with His Spirit. Such a preparation is essential for those for whom God has destined great work (MF 171,1). Elsewhere, he indicates the purpose of solitude in an expression which, in view of its synthesis, could be termed lapidary. Referring to St. Augustine, he indicates that, once he had been converted. “he retired to an isolated place where he lived an extremely solitary and penitential life for three years” (MF 161,1). He then comments:

“... It was in this holy retirement that the Saint became a new man and a man of God and it was there that, after his conversion, he prepared himself to work effectively for the conversion of others...” (MF 161,1).

This is the great value of solitude and the practi-

ces which go with it. It allows one to become a “new man” and a “man of God” besides being a preparation for apostolic work. According to De La Salle, solitude allows one to situate God as the centre of one’s life. Through it one “learns to converse with God” (MF 171,1), to “relish God” (MF 161,1), one becomes “filled with the Spirit of God” (MF 97,3) or with the “fullness of God” (MF 171,1), one is “completely filled with God” (MF 100,2; MF 180,2) or with “God and with his Spirit” (MF 171,3) or with “divine love” (MF 171,2).

2.5. What solitude involves

There is nothing further from the mind of De La Salle than to present an idyllic or comfortable picture of solitude. It is true that, at times, he speaks of it as a *paradise* — as, for example, ... St. Jerome lived in that solitude as in a paradise” (MF 170,2); and, speaking of St. Bruno and his first six companions, “... solitude became a paradise for them” (MF 174,2). However, in the very next line, he also refers to the tasks involved in solitude; “... it is there that he learned to despise himself and not to value any created thing” (MF 170,2; MF 174,2). According to De La Salle, there was a purpose to solitude — there was a dynamic aspect to its pursuit and it involved particular practices. It embraces a spiritual process and — if this is the charism received from God — the preparation for an apostolate.

2.5.1. The tasks particular to solitude

At times De La Salle presents these in summary form. In synthesis, the tasks of solitude are:

A. *the search for one’s own perfection* — “...after having perfected himself” (St. Anthony MF 97,3); “... love recollection so as through it you can work effectively for your own perfection...”; a recommendation to the Brothers in the same meditation.

B. *the search for one’s own sanctification* — “... zeal for his own sanctification had retained him in solitude...” (St. Anthony MF 97,3); “... in the tranquillity of solitude, ignored by the world, occupied only in lamenting one’s own faults and in practising the means of living a holy life...” (MF 174,2).

De La Salle, on occasions, simply indicates the practices typical of solitude:

“... recollection, mortification and prayer were the means used by this Saint (Peter Celestin) to sanctify himself (MF 127,1); St. Jerome “retired immediately to the Syrian desert in order to give himself to a holy and penitential life. Once there, he gave himself to prayer and to meditation on Sacred Scripture and to the practice of its teachings, keeping vigil and fasting continually, isolating himself from all contact with the world...” (MF 170,2).

The tasks which De La Salle associated with solitude can be indicated in an orderly way and in more detail as follows.

2.5.2. *Solitude implies living a penitential life* (cf. “penance”, “mortification”). De La Salle expresses this through the example of the Saints; for example

St. Jerome — “... who grew old in solitude and in the practice of all kinds of austerities” (MD 1,3)

St. Benedict — “... who took refuge in a frightening solitude... where he lived,, given over to extremely harsh austerities...” (MF 111,1).

St. Peter Celestin — “... who spent three years completely mortifying his body so as to be able to resist temptations which tormented him” and which led him to such extremes of austerity that “he used a rock as a pillow for sleeping; he was in his element in silence, daily discipline was his recreation and the belt which he used was a chain of iron...” (MF 127,1).

St. Basil — who, “... in solitude where he built a monastery and gave very wise rules to the religious who submitted themselves to his direction, ...became so accustomed to live in such abstinence that, at the end of his days, his body became so weak as a result of the austerities which he had undergone; and through these means — solitude and fasting — prepared himself to do great work in the Church” (MF 136,1)

St. Augustine — acted in a similar manner “retiring to an isolated place where he lived an extremely solitary and penitential life for three years...” (MF 161,1).

What was the purpose of this penitential life? De La Salle also indicates the answer to that question, again through the example of the lives of the Saints. In the case of:

St. Jerome — it seems that at the end of his life he was moved to undertake it out of “fear of the final judgement” (MD 1,3) even though years before, after having conferred with one of the greatest experts of his time in Sacred Scripture, St. Gregory Nazian-

zen, he had decided to withdraw from the world and to lead a life of penance in order to put Sacred Scripture into practice and in this way come to a fuller knowledge of it (cf. MF 170,2)

St. Peter Celestin – sought through a penitential life to “resist temptations which tormented him: and to sanctify himself” (MF 127,1)

St. Basil – prepared “to do great work for the Church” through such a life (described in more detail in MF 136)

St. Augustine – the penitential life and other practices particular to solitude “made him a new man and a man of God” (MF 161,1).

2.5.3 Solitude involves situating God as the centre of one's life

De La Salle makes much of this aspect when he considers the option for solitude which the Saints made or when he was recommending this option to the Brothers. At times, one can see his own convictions about solitude and the value he places on it as, for example, when he describes its functions:

“... Since in solitude one cannot seek anything other than God one is forced to empty one's heart of all affection for created things with the aim of filling oneself completely with God” (MF 180,2).

In the same commentary he alludes to the “renunciation of everything” (cf. Lk 14,33) or not to have “any attachment for any creature” as the first condition of being a disciple of Jesus. To have one's heart “detached from all things” is, for De La Salle, the height of happiness (cf. MF 105,1). Thus, for example, St. Jerome, in his solitude, “learned to detach himself and not to value any earthly thing” (MF 170,2). The previously quoted commentary on St. Remigius expresses very clearly De La Salle's thought and is a key to the understanding of his insistent recommendations on recollection and on prayer;

“... It is in solitude or complete separation from creatures that one learns to detach oneself from all that is attractive to worldly people and to lose the taste for it and, in consequence, to converse with God who takes great delight in communicating himself with those who have detached themselves from everything since he delights in speaking one to one. The more one's heart is emptied of earthly attractions the more he makes himself known to them and fills them with his spirit...” (MF 171,1).

2.5.4 Prayer as an essential task of solitude

In the context of solitude and of recollection De La Salle reiterates the decisive importance of prayers as an essential dynamism to practise.

In the case of St. Augustine, his “becoming a new man, a man of God” has much to do with prayer. In solitude “he learned to relish God” and it was there, too, that he “also frequently poured out his heart in the divine presence, inconsolable for his past errors and when the enormity of these became apparent he was, at times, plunged into the love of the Lord and never tired of appreciating and giving thanks for the extraordinary mercy of such a loving God towards him. At other times, overwhelmed by the sense of God's greatness and incomprehensibility and by the gifts He bestows on man, his heart was first melted and then moved in loving expression towards his God” (MF 161,1). Bearing in mind the expression of feelings which St. Augustine indicates in his *Confessions* (cf. RODRIGUE, J.G., CL 47, p. 390), anyone familiar with the language of De La Salle with respect to the presence of God and with his teaching on the method of prayer (cf. CAMPOS, M., and SAUVAGE, M., CL 50) will recognise in this passage a description of Augustine praying:

“... It is in solitude... where one learns... to speak to God who takes great delight in communicating himself to those who have detached themselves from everything since he delights in talking one to one...” (MF 171,1).

In the case of St. Benedict, in the frightening solitude in which he took refuge, “... he lived in the practice of continuous prayer” (MF 111,1).

De La Salle insists on the necessity of “filling oneself with God and with his Spirit” (cf. 2.3) and sees this blessing occurring in its fullness only through recollection and prayer;

“... In this world you should not seek and desire reputation but rather the fullness of the spirit of God in order to live according to your state and to properly fulfil your employment... Rest assured that you will not attain this fullness better than through recollection and prayer. Consequently, you must love the first and apply yourself with great fervour to the second” (MF 171,1).

2.5.5. *The study and experience of Sacred Scripture*

With regard to this De La Salle does not present a systematic teaching but rather uses the examples and experiences of the saints as a means of making his personal commentary. Thus, for example, when speaking of St. John Chrysostom, he says that “he retired into solitude where he applied himself to the study of Sacred Scripture which provided him with many extraordinary insights into religious doctrine” (“un fond de religion”). A similar commentary emerges with regard to the imposing figure of St. Jerome who, having discovered that “secular learning, far from leading him to relish God, was rather leading away from Him, renounced it and then spared no effort to instruct himself in Sacred Scripture to attain full knowledge of all the mysteries contained in it...” (MF 170,1). St. Jerome was consulted from all corners of the globe and he also visited many countries seeking contact with the greatest experts in the Scriptures until his conversation with St. Gregory Nazianzen convinced him of the necessity to retire into solitude and there to “give himself to prayer, to meditation on Sacred Scripture and to the practice of its contents” (MF 170,2). It was there that St. Jerome discovered that to “properly know Sacred Scripture one had to begin by putting it into practice” (MF 170,2).

With reference to this theme De La Salle also draws consequences from the maxims of the Gospel. However, in our context, perhaps the most interesting aspect is to see how he links “the study of the Sacred books of Scripture, particularly of the New Testament”, with “being filled with the spirit of God” which is a central goal of solitude. A similar perspective is presented in his commentary on St. Augustine;

“...There (in solitude) he learned to relish God and to practise to perfection the rules of the Holy Gospel which furnished him with material for his meditations...” (MF 161,1).

2.6. **Solitude is not an absolute**

We have referred to this in indicating previously that solitude is not sought for itself (cf. 2.2) and, in his consideration of those saints who lived in soli-

tude, De La Salle indicates that there are more important values than solitude which may demand that one abandons it. For the moment, one must take as a starting point the fact of the diversity of charisms and that the will of God leads people along different paths (cf. “action of God”) as is clearly evidenced in the stories of sanctity used by De La Salle as his starting point in speaking of solitude. Among the saints whom he chose to consider there were some who took the option of solitude for life. There were others who chose to live the option within a community while, for others, the option was limited to a particular period of time, more or less long, which was interrupted, either by a personal decision or following an appeal from an ecclesiastical or other source. In this respect the lives of Saints Anthony, Peter Celestin and Severus are of particular interest.

St. Anthony – De La Salle describes the spiritual journey of this saint in detail (cf. MF 97,1.2) and he indicates that at a certain moment the saint interrupted his solitude in response to a more important necessity:

“... After having perfected himself, and already filled with the spirit of God in the desert, St. Anthony left it for a time in order to encourage the martyrs and to confirm the Christians in their faith (who were in danger because of persecution). Zeal for his own sanctification had maintained him in solitude and that which he had for the salvation of his brothers drew him out of it. Further... once the persecution had passed he returned to the desert” (MF 97,3).

St. Peter Celestin – Rather different were the psychological traits and circumstances operating in this saint who, from an early age, was apparently drawn to solitude (cf. MF 127,1.3). However, given his eminent sanctity, in his absence he was elected Pope and, since there was no way of avoiding it, he was forced to assume this extremely important responsibility. In his case it was the ecclesial call, much against his will, that led him to break with the charism of solitude (cf. his inner tension is well-expressed in MF 127,3).

St. Severus – The meditation on this saint (MF 103), according to the experts, is almost certainly not from the pen of De La Salle (cf. RODRIGUE, J.G., CL 47, p. 539). However, in this meditation a similar experience of leaving solitude in response to a call to

the episcopacy is also related (MF 103,2).

2.7. The fruits or advantages of solitude

2.7.1. "He became a new man" and "a man of God"

Throughout the previous sections we have already noted the fruits or the advantages of solitude as indicated in De La Salle's thought. In summary form, we can say that solitude facilitates an encounter with God and the centring of one's life in Him; in the expressive phrase that De La Salle used with reference to St. Augustine, "in this holy retreat he became a new man and a man of God" (MF 161,1). Moreover, because of what is entailed in it, and through the fulness of God and of his Spirit, solitude constitutes the best preparation for "effective work for the conversion of others" (ibid.).

2.7.2. A preparation for, and a condition of, "effective work for the conversion of others": a ministerial perspective on solitude

As in many themes De La Salle is not neutral in his treatment of this theme and the ministerial perspective is always present whenever he deals with it. This is explained by his own understanding of the salvific plan of God and by the fact that his thought is directed to the Brothers who have been sent by God for the salvation of those confided to their care. The option of the saints and their experience of solitude allow him to express his thought with clarity. There is a close relationship between solitude and the salvific ministry. For example, St. Remigius who was plucked out of his solitude and consecrated archbishop of Rheims at the age of 22, "... displayed ardent zeal for the good of the Church in the performance of his episcopal duties and omitted nothing which could contribute to their accomplishment..." (MF 171,2). From this starting point — as in many other cases — De La Salle sets out his thesis and describes the internal dynamism of solitude;

"...This is the fruit which normally accompanies the retired life... (the "real and authentic retreat" says De La Salle)...; the more one has been filled with divine love the more one seeks a way of communicating it to others for the good of the Church since God obliges one to deal with the world. Consequently, these extraordinary men, full of the spirit

of God, apply themselves with all possible diligence to make others both know and relish what they themselves feel and, burning with the zeal which inspires them, they are effective in helping many souls to give themselves to God" (MF 171,2).

Nor is this everything. De La Salle completes his thought by indicating that solitude is a condition of ministerial effectiveness and he expresses this with conviction;

"...When a man called to work for the salvation of souls has succeeded, like St. Remigius, in filling himself with the thought of God and of his spirit in solitude, he can accomplish all that he undertakes. Nothing can resist him — not even God, so to speak, as Moses demonstrated in a way when he demanded that "God accomplish what he asked for the people who were confided to him..." (Ex 32, 14) (MF 171,3).

2.7.3. The most appropriate context for solitude

A. De La Salle concludes that solitude is the perfect environment in which both to become a man of God and to prepare oneself to be used in a ministerial way by God;

"...What happiness it would be if this divine word (referring to Lk 14,33 : "... He who does not renounce everything cannot be my disciple") so penetrated your heart that you had no attachment for any creature! Moreover, you will be worthy of your ministry only to the extent that you take on this disposition since this is the first thing that God desires of those who wish to be his disciple. Nothing contributes more to obtaining this than solitude since in preventing one from seeking anything other than God it forces one to empty one's heart of all affection for what is created in order that it may be filled completely by God..." (MF 180,2).

In commenting on the Gospel preaching of St. John Chrysostom, who "won hearts for God", he writes;

"...When one has been filled with God in solitude one can then speak of him boldly and effectively and lead those to know him who have been buried in sin and ignorance, living in a blindness which they themselves do not recognise..." (MF 100,2).

"...With reference to St. Augustine he writes;

"... It was in this holy retirement that the saint, after his conversion, ... prepared himself to work effecti-

vely for the conversion of others..." (MF 161,1).

B. This would be the appropriate place to gather together the significant expressions of De La Salle with regard to solitude which reveal his personal conviction on its advantages;

"... St. Romuald lived 100 years in solitude which seemed a very short time to him because of the consolations ...which the Lord gave him to enjoy during this time. According to Lawrence Justinian, if the world knew the delights that are enjoyed in recollection cities would be turned into deserts and the deserts would soon become populated..." (MF 105,1). St. Jerome, in order "to receive from God the insights which He wanted to communicate to him, withdrew from the hustle of the world in such a way that worldly affairs did not prevent him from immersing himself in the truths which He wished to reveal to men..." (MF 170,1); he "... lived in that solitude as in a paradise" (MF 170,2). A similar appraisal was made by St. Bruno and his companions; "... Such was the style of life lived by St. Bruno and his companions that they could say with St. Jerome that the city was as unruly as a prison for them and solitude as peaceful as a paradise..." (MF 174,2).

3. THE SOLITUDE OF THE BROTHER

3.1. De La Salle's teaching on solitude destined for the Brothers

According to De La Salle, solitude is not an option only for some saints since the type of life lived by the Brother also involves its share of solitude. His general teaching on solitude (outlined above in 2) was destined for the Brothers and, in fact, all this teaching was developed by De La Salle with the Brothers of the Institute in mind.

3.2. The solitude of the Brother in his own community

The solitude of the Brother is none other than the style of life of the Institute outlined in the Common Rules. This is "his" solitude or his desert or, to be more precise, the solitude of the Brother is precisely his community with the experiences, the demands and the exercises which are involved. De La Salle's comment on the Blessed Virgin are perfectly applicable to the Brother; "... Mary fled into the de-

sert (Ap 12,6), that is, into the Temple, a place apart from contact with people where she found the solitude which God had destined for her..." (MF 191,3). In the same meditation De La Salle says to the Brothers; "...You have the happiness of living in the house of God; in it you have committed yourselves to his service..." (MF 191,2).

Obviously, De La Salle is not content with what is called "exterior" solitude or recollection. It is necessary to perform the tasks particular to solitude and recollection so that it be really effective. The purpose of solitude is, precisely, to facilitate and guarantee interior recollection. The community of the Brother is this "solitude" which is capable of making him a man of God and an effective instrument for the ministry which God has entrusted him;

"... If recollection, mortification and prayer were the means used by this saint (St. Peter Celestin) to sanctify himself, you also have the possibility to make use of them in order to grow closer to God since in your Institute there are many such exercises daily..." (MF 127,1).

3.3. Ministerial solitude – balancing solitude and ministry

The life of the Brother is similar to that of the saint who embraced solitude for a time then undertook apostolic tasks before returning to solitude (cf. 2.6). De La Salle himself underlines this similarity. After considering St. Anthony — who "withdrew to the desert" and "after having perfected himself, and filled by the Spirit of God in the desert, he left it for a time with the aim of encouraging the martyrs and to confirm the Christians in the faith..." and "once the persecution had passed he returned to the desert..." (MF 97,3) — he directs the following thought to the Brothers;

"...You have to act in a similar way. You must love recollection in order to work effectively for your perfection. However, you must leave it when God calls you to work for the salvation of those he has confided to you. As soon as you have completed what God has asked of you, you must retire again to your solitude, imitating St. Anthony..." (MF 97,3).

He makes similar recommendations in his commentary on St. Peter Celestin, who was pluc-

ked from his solitude to become Pope but who, after a time, resigned his office in order to return to solitude;

“...While you are required by God to devote your attention to the external functions of your employment, and to find the means to sanctify yourself through them ... Give yourself then to them in such a way that as soon as your presence there is no longer necessary return to your community, as to a secure place, and find your consolation in the assiduous performance of the spiritual exercises...” (MF 127,3).

The life of the Brother revolves around the community and his ministry. He exercises both by “the order and will of God” (cf. RC 2,4) and both are related to personal sanctification and to that of the pupils. Both need to be mutually fed and both constitute “the work of God” and the “work of one’s own sanctification”. The tasks and the practices of solitude have a profound ministerial sense. They are not simply ascetical or personal practices but are required for ministry. The community is the “ministerial solitude” of the Brother while the ministry of the Brother is enriched and fed in the solitude of the community.

De La Salle insists that the secret of success in the ministry to pupils lies in being filled with God which is the chief goal of an environment of solitude which constitutes the Lasallian community. Consequently, then, it is more a question of integration and the mutual complementarity of community and ministry than of opposition;

“...When one has been filled with God in solitude one can then speak of him boldly and effectively and lead those to know him who have been buried in sin and ignorance, living in a blindness which they themselves do not recognise... Given that your community has, as its obligation, to daily make God known to pupils, instructing them in the truths of the Gospel and teaching them to put them into practice, you must fill yourself with thoughts of God and be inflamed with the love of his holy law with the aim of ensuring that your words are effective with the pupils” (MF 100,2).

“...The employment which you exercise demands great zeal but this will be of little use if it does not produce effect and it will not produce this effect if it is not the fruit of God’s love which is within you” (MF 171,2).

The expressions “to fill oneself with God”, “to

be inflamed with love for his holy law”, “the love of God residing within you” refer to this centrality of God that was earlier classified as “the search and the fruit of solitude” (cf. 2.4).

3.4. The tasks of the Brother in his solitude

Simple allusions of De La Salle with regard to the example of the saints who sanctified themselves in solitude indicate the nature and the value of the tasks which the Brother undertakes in his solitude. However, there is nothing new or distinct from what has been previously outlined (cf. 2.5) in that they have reference to the ministry which the Brother exercises. It is sufficient to simply quote the appropriate texts;

3.4.1. *Mortification and Prayer*

“...Be faithful in carrying them out (the practices of recollection, mortification and prayer which are daily exercises in the Institute) and be convinced that the fruit you produce in souls will be in proportion to the love you show for these three practices and to the extent that you practice them...” (MF 127,1).

“...In this world you should not seek or desire reputation (alluding to St. Remigius who was so favoured by God in solitude that the nature of his virtue gained him an extraordinary reputation) but rather the fullness of the spirit of God in order to live according to your state and to properly fulfil your employment... Rest assured that you will not attain this fullness better than through recollection and prayer. Consequently, you must love the first and apply yourself with great fervour to the second” (MF 171,1).

“...Through these two means — solitude and fasting — St. Basil prepared himself to do great work in the Church. If you wish your ministry to produce abundant fruit in souls nothing will so help you to attain this than withdrawal from the world and temperance. This contributes in great measure to the preservation of purity which draws abundant graces from God not only for one’s own benefit but also for the benefit of others...” (MF 136,1).

3.4.2. *The reading and the experience of Sacred Scripture*

“...You have the happiness to live detached from the world, often reading and hearing Sacred Scripture. In consequence, you must learn from it the means of salvation and the holy maxims that through your profession you are obliged to practise and to teach to others. Meditate on it often and en-

sure that it is also the normal subject of your conversation" (MF 100,1).

"...You are not seeking to make your disciples simply Christians through your work but to make them real Christians and it is of little use having them baptised if they do not live in conformity with the Christian spirit. Moreover, to communicate it to others one must have it in abundance oneself...

"...Your employment obliges you without any doubt to put Sacred Scripture into practice. Therefore, read it frequently, with attention and affection. Make it the object of your study with the aim, above all, of putting it into practice" (MF 171,3).

"... If you wish to be filled with the spirit of God and to be properly prepared for your employment centre yourself in the study of the books of Sacred Scripture, especially the New Testament, with the aim of it being the norm of conduct as much for yourselves as for those whom you instruct..." (MF 170,1).

4. SUMMARY

By way of summary it could be said that, for De La Salle, solitude or recollection is an essential condition for encountering both oneself and God and, in consequence, is an essential condition for ministerial effectiveness. In his solitude — that is, in his community — the Brother meets God and

becomes filled with his love thus preparing himself to be an instrument of salvation. The nature of life lived by the Brother involves a time for "solitude-encounter" and a time for involvement in the "salvation-ministry" of others. Underlying this Lasallian vision and teaching as models are those saints, "images of sanctity", whose experience has served as De La Salle's starting-point in developing his teaching on solitude. It is also based on the long experience of holy people and a long tradition of religious life as well as, undoubtedly, the orientations of the directors with whom he himself worked. Furthermore, although this is not specifically alluded to, there is the biblical dynamism of prophetic call — a constant in the dual-faceted encounter with God, with a God who cherishes plans of salvation and who sends one to save others — which is a central theme in Lasallian teaching and spirituality.

It would be very interesting to parallel Lasallian teaching on solitude with the personal biography and foundational journey of De La Salle himself from this perspective of solitude and to see the function and the richness of the dynamisms — recollection, the tasks proper to solitude, style of Lasallian community, the experience of retreats, creation and nature of novitiate etc...).

Complementary themes:

Child-Pupil-Disciple; Community; Disciples; Employment; Exercises; God's role; God's work; Heart-to touch hearts; Mental Prayer; Ministry; Renunciation-Detachment; Retreat; Rule-Regularity; Saints; Salvation; Silence; State; World; Zeal.

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