

66. ABANDONMENT TO PROVIDENCE

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In order to live, a person has to take himself in hand, accept his responsibilities and assert his mastery over the world. However, his experience of beauty, love and contact with God lead him to become detached, to abandon himself even to death, which is the ultimate degree of detachment. To trust completely in Providence or to use the means God has given us; to forget self completely or resign from our responsibility as a human being: where do we draw the line? Today sects are a source of fascination, in the past there was the dispute over Quietism. It is not easy to define holy abandonment.

1. THE VIEWS OF CLOSE CONTEMPORARIES

The portrait of John Baptist de La Salle on the frontispiece of the first edition of his meditations is accompanied by an inscription which enumerates "the Christian virtues" characteristic of "the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, who [...] lived in a state of total abandonment to Providence for the forty years he lived with the Brothers of his Institute".

Br Timothée, the Superior General, who edited these meditations in 1730, must surely have endorsed this brief summary, convinced that it drew attention to a major characteristic of the way in which De La Salle had practised the Christian virtues, "especially

charity and zeal for the instruction of youth, and in particular, of the poor".

Fr Baüyn, who died in 1696, was De La Salle's spiritual director. He admired "his perfect abandonment to Divine Providence and his unreserved resignation to God's good pleasure" (CL 7,330).

In a letter dated 1703, Charles de la Grange, parish priest of Villiers le Bel, speaks of the refusal of the Brothers in Paris to accept an ecclesiastic as superior in the place of De La Salle : "No one can be more edified than I [...] by his total abandonment to Providence [...]. There is no Quietism in this" (CL 7, 418).

Quoting the words of a canon of the cathedral of Laon — probably Pierre Guyart — who had known the Founder of the Brothers at close quarters, Blain states that “his heroic abandonment to Divine Providence” is a major trait of “M. de La Salle’s character” (CL 8,254f & 262).

The examples which support this assertion show that this trait is not primarily an element in a purely

ascetic programme, but a means to bring about the existence of the Christian Schools. Fr Barré who, in France, was the first to found “Christian and gratuitous schools” (CL 7,172) had not been able to find candidates suited to “a lifestyle of total destitution and abandonment to Divine Providence” (CL 7,146). Would De La Salle find any? Would he succeed in making them find stability in their vocation?

2. THE TEACHING IN THE 67th MEDITATION

The 67th meditation, entitled “Of Abandonment to Providence”, tells the Brothers that in the Gospel of the day, Jesus Christ is speaking in particular to them, when he says: “Make it your first care to find the Kingdom of God” (Mt 6,33).

This is something that concerns the Brothers because of their vocation, which leads them to work for the establishment of the reign of God in the hearts of their pupils (MD 67,1). The second point provides the Brothers with the convincing proof — “See how the wild lilies grow...” — that Jesus gives his apostles. If they fulfil their duties and devote all their energy solely to making God reign in their own hearts and in those of their pupils, they will never lack what is necessary: faith tells them so (MD 67,2).

2.1. The teachers object :

“It’s easy for you to talk !”

This is not the first time that De La Salle uses this “language of perfection” (CL 7,191) when speaking to his followers. In 1682, when his teachers were apprehensive about their financial future, he had appealed to them to put their trust in Providence (CL 7,187).

They replied: “It’s easy for you to talk, since you have everything you need. If our establishment fails, you remain on your feet; the fact our lives are ruined does not mean yours is. All that awaits us is poverty, and begging as the only way to alleviate it” (CL 7,188).

The direct language of the teachers made De La Salle realise that his reference to the Gospel did not carry much weight, given that he did not share the social condition of those he wanted to challenge (Cf. AEP 55).

After much hesitation and reflection, he finally decided to give up his canonry and his inheritance. Blain (CL 7,218) describes De La Salle’s thoughts as

he sought to discover what to do with his inheritance: should he “found” his schools, that is, set up a capital fund and use the interest generated for their upkeep, as Nicolas Roland did, and as the teachers and his friends wanted him to? As André Rayez writes (RAM 121,14): “Barré, the man of Providence, gave him a practical example which De La Salle followed”. This writer stresses the Salesian (St Francis de Sales) contribution to the spiritual movement of the 17th century.

2.2. The example of Fr Barré

Nicolas Barré’s advice was decisive: “Divine Providence must be the only fund on which the Christian Schools should be established” (CL 7,190 & 217). And so the schools in Rheims would not benefit from De La Salle’s inheritance. To proclaim the Gospel to the poor, one must follow the example of the Son of Man and abandon oneself completely to Providence (Cf. AEP 57).

The appeal made to De La Salle had come from teachers who were trying to establish a school for the poor. It was to Fr Barré, who was doing similar work, that De La Salle turned in order to discern what God wanted of him. It is this context which makes abandonment to Providence so important. And when De La Salle, in DB, which is written for children also, quotes “Make it your first care to find the Kingdom of God”, he uses this quotation as a basis for “the resignation we must have to the will of God regarding temporal goods, when we pray to him” (CL 21,258 = DB 4,3,15).

2.3. A personal commitment

During the famine of the winter of 1684 (CL 7,219), De La Salle distributed his personal wealth to the poor. He did not touch, of course, the inheritance

of his brothers and sisters and, on the advice of his spiritual director, kept an income of 200 livres (CL 4,61) which was the bare minimum he asked per Brother when a school was established. On a number of occasions, the Brothers and their Founder experienced utter destitution: "Abandonment to Providence would not be rewarded always by a life of relative ease" (AEP 69).

By the 1691 "vow of association and union", and then by the vow of 1694, which constituted the *Society of the Christian Schools*, each of those who made the vows made a commitment in solidarity with their companions "to direct together and by association gratuitous schools [...] even if I were obliged to beg for alms and live on bread alone in order to do so" (CL 2,42 = EP 2,0,3).

This is precisely the risk the first teachers refused to run, and which De La Salle took, first before them and then with them. In this context, words acquire a special significance. De La Salle saw that, since his own renunciation, no Brother had left because the Community was not "founded" (CL 7,326).

2.4. Material goods and apostolic workers

Basing himself on St Paul — "You must not put a muzzle on the ox when it is treading out the

corn", 1 Co 9,9 — the Founder exhorts the Brothers to abandon themselves to God regarding temporal goods because they are gathering in a harvest of souls, and it was the Lord who employed them (MD 67,3).

Other spiritual writers immediately see abandonment to Providence as having to do with interior trials and personal salvation. We shall see later that De La Salle also at times appeals to Providence in this personal context. Here, however, we see this view of faith making him accept a precarious situation, which is the situation of apostolic workers totally committed to the mission they have received to bring the Gospel to children.

The example of St Barnabas, who sold some land and gave the money he received to the Apostles, shows "the good that can be accomplished in the Church by one who is truly detached", who demonstrates much faith, since, "when one abandons oneself to God's Providence unreservedly, one is like a man who would put to sea without sail or oars" (MF 134,1).

From commitment to commitment, De La Salle and his Brothers demonstrated a great deal of faith and did much good in the Church. Abandonment to the Providence which employs them to bring salvation to poor children, and being present to them, are two aspects of the same process (Cf. AEP 70).

3. THE NEED FOR POVERTY AND FORESIGHT

St Cajetan, who did not allow the members of his Order to beg, is an example of excessive detachment in God's service, or in the words of meditation 153, "to such an excess, if we may say so. He wished to rely solely on divine Providence for food, clothing and other bodily wants" (MF 153,3).

The Brothers cannot be too disinterested in their work: they teach the poor. They are committed to running schools gratuitously and have promised to live on bread alone, if needs be, rather than receive anything from the children or their parents (Cf. MF 153,3).

The language here is reminiscent of the formula of vows and of the *Collection*, when it reminds the Brothers "Of the obligations of the vows". While not eve-

ryone pronounces vows, "gratuity is essential for their Institute" (RC 7,1) and all must be "always ready to beg, if Providence wishes it, and to die utterly destitute" (CL 15,179f = R 15,10,1).

3.1. With Gabriel Drolin

In a letter to Gabriel Drolin, who had been sent to Rome without any kind of human support, De La Salle speaks of his joy at knowing that he is prepared to live detached from the world: "Still, when you decide to do this, you must put yourself entirely in the hands of Divine Providence, or if you do not have enough virtue for that nor enough faith, then you must take the necessary means before you carry out your plan. If you do neither, you are not acting as a Christian nor as an intelligent man" (LA 19,14).

In the following letter he explains his thoughts more clearly: it is advantageous to live withdrawn from the world, but “you have to have life’s necessities, and you need to know where you can get them before you leave the world” (LA 20,15). This is a far cry from the “duty of not using foresight”, which some advocated.

When the Founder agreed to open a school, he insisted on a **regular salary for each of his teachers**. His family background had taught him the value of a regularly drawn up contract. However, there was nothing to fall back on in the case of illness or the closure of the school. In addition, the community had to look after the Brothers without salaries: the director, student Brothers, the elderly.

Abandonment to Providence presupposes discernment and, therefore, advice (LA 13,14). When Gabriel Drolin fears to abandon himself too much to Providence, De La Salle tells him: “Never think that I will abandon you” (LA 14,5): community solidarity.

De La Salle reminds Gabriel Drolin to look for signs from Providence to see if God “approves his work” and if Providence is helping or “wanting to help him” (LA 20,17). Four months later he reprimands him for leaving the house of M. de La Bussière who had agreed to provide meals for him for no payment: it was providential, “a place provided by Providence” at a time when the finances of the Institute did not allow the Founder to provide for the needs of the Brother left on his own in Rome. Br Gabriel could at least have asked if De La Salle agreed with his leaving (LA 21,7-8).

In the preceding letter he had said: “God placed you in M. de La Bussière’s house”. He should have stayed there till he had an employment which ensured his financial independence (LA 20,6 & 9).

3.2. “The guidance of Providence”

“You do well to wait on the guidance of Providence”, he tells Gabriel Drolin in the same letter (LA

20,3). A month previously he had written: “As for myself, I do not like to make the first move in any endeavour, and I will not do it in Rome any more than elsewhere. I leave it to Providence to make the first move and then I am satisfied” (LA 18,17).

Blain recalls a number of examples of this attitude in the life of the Founder. The bishop of Chartres offered to help him obtain official recognition of the Institute. The Founder thanked him, but he did not think that such steps were appropriate at the moment: “Since the Institute of the Brothers was the work of Providence, the question of Letters Patent were best left to it” (CL 8,267).

A few years before the Founder’s death, the Brothers wished to bring up the question again, but he answered: “Let yourselves be guided by Providence: you can bring it up again after my death if you like” (CL 8,267). One day, in connection with the property of St Yon which had been leased on somewhat precarious terms, De La Salle urged his Brothers to abandon themselves to Divine Providence: “They had to consider buying it. This proposal surprised them” (CL 8,158), because this was not the first example of abandonment that would have naturally sprung to mind. All the more so as his business sense had led him to forbid Br Thomas to improve the garden of St Yon for fear that this would put up the price when they tried to buy it (CL 8,264).

These few examples show that “the guidance of Providence”, far from being opposed to prudent human behaviour, in fact presupposes it and guides it towards the accomplishment of the mission received. This is the spirit in which a superior should inspire great confidence in his inferiors; and to do so he will be careful “to provide for all their spiritual and bodily needs” (*Advice for Brothers in charge*, 47, if this text is really De La Salle’s). The Rule says the same thing regarding the sick: “Each of the Brothers will be given whatever he needs” (RC 22,1).

4. "IT IS GOD WHO, IN HIS PROVIDENCE, HAS ESTABLISHED THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS" (MR 193, TITLE)

"It is true that I began to train Brothers to run schools gratuitously" (LI 117,2). Towards the end of his life, De La Salle recognised the role he had played in the creation of the Institute. The reason we are concerned by the role he played and by his thinking is first of all because he was the Founder. The statement with which he introduces the *Meditations for the time of retreat* is all the more significant on this account: "That it is God who, in his Providence, has established the Christian Schools".

"In his providential care, God has appointed others to take the place of fathers and mothers in this responsibility. He sends persons with the necessary enlightenment and zeal to help children attain the knowledge of God and his Mysteries" (MR 193,2). Later he says: "Not only does God will that everyone come to the knowledge of truth, but he wants everyone to be saved [...] and he has chosen you to help in this work" (MR 193,3).

The title of the 5th meditation speaks of "those chosen by Providence for the work of education" (MR 197, title). The same idea occurs in the MF: "Adore God's Providence in withdrawing you from the world [...] for the purpose of training a large number of children in the Christian spirit" (MF 131,1). We have here the basis of the ministry of Christian education.

4.1. God's Providence and the ministry of the Church

It is God who has chosen the Brothers (MR 193,3) and it is the Church which has chosen them likewise to procure for children the spirit of Christianity (MR 199,1). While the Christian teacher is needed for the transmission of the faith, he cannot undertake this task without an explicit mandate from the Church, because the providential will of God is involved (POUTER, I,205, see in bibliography). The Providence of God and the authority of the Church go hand in hand, as do Providence and prudent human behaviour.

We see this clearly on the occasion when it seemed to De La Salle that the Church authorities were opposed to some aspects of the Brothers' ministry: he drew up memoirs to defend the choice of "a strange

habit" for the Brothers (CL 11,352 = MH 0,0,33) and for using French to teach reading (CL 7,375f); he disappeared for a while till the storm died down (CL 8,39) and left Paris discreetly when the Cardinal de Noailles sided with the Jansenists (CL 8,129): there are many means available for down-to-earth discernment.

Daily discernment takes place through obedience by abandonment to the guidance of superiors: "Fidelity to revealing one's conscience to one's superior or director" (CL 15,107 = R 13,2). This also implies the government of the Institute by one of the Brothers and the refusal to have an ecclesiastical superior who is not a member of the Society. This request is much more than the legitimate wish of a group to govern itself (CL 8,131). It implies discerning the will of God together and abandoning oneself to it.

4.2. Abandonment and the guidance of God

In a letter to a Brother, De La Salle is pleased that the latter's disposition is "that of total abandonment" (LA 34,1). In a letter to another Brother he says the same thing: "I am very pleased at your self abandonment which leads you to do whatever is required of you" (LI 60,6). This is not, however, the passivity of Quietism: "In prayer often abandon yourself to God's guidance and tell him frequently that all you want is the accomplishment of his will" (LA 33,7). One needs to be able to give in to this interior attraction (Cf. CL 14,124 foreword = EM 19,330), I must ask God in prayer "that he tell me what he wants me to do and that he inspire me with the disposition he wants me to have" (LI 5,2).

This is particularly necessary for "abandonment to God in trials and spiritual dryness" (MD 20). We must not feel "abandoned by God" when we are tempted (MD 17,3), or feel incapable of doing good (MD 17,1), but we should adore "Jesus Christ's abandonment to suffering and death" (MD 24). It is worth noting in this last point the responsible attitude of Jesus in adapting to circumstances in order to be faithful to the will of his Father (MD 24,1). It may be here that the key lies regarding how to apply teachings initially written for the Brothers to Lasallian lay people.

5. CONCLUSION : ABANDONING OURSELVES TO PROVIDENCE TODAY

In a world in which insurance companies agree to cover so many foreseeable and unforeseeable risks, how can we follow the example of St John Baptist de La Salle and abandon ourselves to Providence? Should we do as Mother Teresa of Calcutta and refuse to accept state social security in the name of total reliance on Providence?

De La Salle, as we have seen, took a different approach. In a world in which material security was usually dependent on income from a safe capital fund—a foundation—he chose an approach based on the payment of salaries to his Brothers, paid, in a number of instances, by property companies which owned the community and school premises.

At the present time, when security is generally assured by a regular salary, we see volunteers accepting to devote some years of their lives, for hardly any salary, to help young people in the Third or Fourth World. By taking risks regarding their careers, their peace of mind and sometimes their health, they experience more easily the abandonment spoken of by the Founder of the Brothers.

In fact, the demanding experience of going to work among the poor can help us to work towards and achieve identification with Christ, the evangeliser of the poor, who employs us as his “ministers”.

All Christians are not called to this type of commitment, but the abandonment to God which established the Christian schools enables everyone to share in Jesus’ abandonment to the will of his Father, according to the vocation he has discovered through assiduous prayer.

One way which can help us adopt a spirit of abandonment to the guidance of God is to join an educational team and accept to take into account, through its discernment regarding God’s will for us, the appeals of our superiors.

This presupposes an active faith, a “spirit of faith” which makes us look at persons and institutions in the way that God sees them. This makes us see a scale of values according to which things and organisations are less important than the persons who put themselves at their service. “God has made of man his own Providence”, St Thomas Aquinas tells us. It is by making use of the necessary means, without making them an end in themselves, that a person abandons himself to God in a responsible manner.

Always putting means at the service of the persons for whom they are intended is to start off resolutely along a path that is particularly demanding regarding purity of actions and motives.

Complementary themes

Conduct
Consolation

Director
God

God’s Work
Ministry
Renunciation

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