

79. HUMILITY

Summary

1. The “deep humility of M. de La Salle” (CL 8,402).

2. Humility as perceived at the time

2.1. The Trévoux Dictionary 2.2. Spiritual writers.

3. Humility in the catechisms and “Instructions” of De La Salle

3.1. Humility is learnt as a part of personal development 3.2. In a sacramental context (GA) 3.3. Humility and prayer (DB) 3.4. Biblical motivation (DA) 3.5. Humility of Jesus and the saints (DC) 3.6. For those who live in the “world” (RB).

4. In De La Salle’s works written for the Brothers

4.1. One of the “principal virtues” 4.2. During the exercise of mental prayer (EM) 4.3. With the exaggerated terminology of the times 4.4. Ascetical humility (MF) 4.5. Apostolic humility (MF) 4.6. “Self-contempt” (MD) 4.7. Humility and “love of prayer”.

5. In the letters of “the humble priest” (CL 8,241).

People move easily from exaggerated self-esteem to self-contempt. For Christians, a calm self-acceptance can result only from love received disinterestedly, because love is humble. Humility is one of the ascetic forms it takes and it is one of the most demanding. St John Baptist de La Salle follows the ascetic tradition of the Church strictly, except where he insists on the apostolic humility of conformity.

1. THE “DEEP HUMILITY OF M. DE LA SALLE” (CL 8,402)

Not only did De La Salle preach humility, but he also practised it. His biographers give frequent examples of this (CL 10,189f). John Baptist Blain devotes a long section to the “deep humility of M. de La Salle” (CL 8,402f). One section bears the following heading: “Poverty and mental prayer earned him great insight regarding self-knowledge”.

A single quotation is sufficient to give us an out-

line of our subject: “On those occasions, he would say to those who knew of the bad treatment he was receiving and who had come to commiserate with him: ‘Do you not know that we are destined to be despised and persecuted? It is something each one must accept when he enters God’s service’. Then he would add: ‘But what happiness to suffer something for the one who suffered so much for us’” (CL 8,419).

2. HUMILITY AS PERCEIVED AT THE TIME

2.1. The Trévoux dictionary

It is perhaps interesting to note that this famous dictionary, which came out in the year of the Founder's death, was produced by the Jesuits. It gives two definitions of the word "humility". The first seems to be based on natural morality, an idea which came up regularly during the 18th century, and the second on Christian spirituality:

1. "Virtue opposed to pride and conducive to submission, to abasement before our superiors and to those to whom we must give honour and show respect".
2. "Among Christians, this is the name given to an interior virtue which makes them consider themselves as nothing before God, which makes them endure insults, indignity and persecution without impatience or complaints".

This last meaning is well illustrated by a quotation from Blaise Pascal, referring to the word "humble": "St Augustine states that redemption had to come through humility, so that man, who had fallen at the urging of a proud angel, could rise again through the help of a humble mediator who would inspire him with humility".

2.2. Spiritual writers¹

St Augustine thinks that humility does not consist in a systematic contempt of self. It stems rather from a deep awareness of our place as human beings and

makes us see ourselves as we are in order to make us open to God's action. The mystery of Christian life consists in voluntary abasement with the incarnate Word, who humbled himself to the extent of dying on the cross, and who, because of the cross, now lives in glory.

Several writers and, in particular, St Teresa of Avila, associate humility with mental prayer: "The Lord gives us a humility quite different from our own [which] is nothing by comparison with this true and enlightened humility which he teaches us and which produces within us shame capable of totally overwhelming us. It is a very well known fact that, through the knowledge he gives us, God wishes us to understand that, naturally speaking, there is no good in us".

Pierre de Bérulle († 1629) concentrates especially on abnegation (of which humility is the deepest manifestation): "There are two essential foundation stones on which this abnegation is built. The first is a very low esteem for all things created and most of all for oneself. [...] The second is a very high esteem for God [...] because it is humility that gives a soul capacity for God, and the extent of this capacity and of the soul's disposition towards God depends on the extent of this humility".

The Jesuit François Guilloché († 1684) destroys any remaining illusions about humility: "To abnegate yourself totally before God is good, providing you do so without secretly taking pleasure in it".

3. IN THE CATECHISMS AND "INSTRUCTIONS" OF DE LA SALLE

3.1. Humility is learnt as a part of personal development

There is little mention of humility in catechisms intended for beginners, but as the teaching becomes more advanced there is an increasing mention of it. The reason for this is probably because the catechism manual is limited in size, and because in later pages, subjects are treated which involve humility. It is as if education in humility goes hand in hand with the various stages of personal development.

3.2. In a sacramental context (GA)

Beginners learn in the *Large Summary* of the *Du-*

ties of a Christian towards God that "humility is a virtue" opposed to pride, through which "one comes to know and [...] and despise oneself" (CL 23,385 = GA 0,20,5).

The model it proposes is "the great humility of Our Lord, of the Most Blessed Virgin and the saints". There is no mention of the Gospel teaching regarding this virtue, which should make us "willingly perform low and humiliating actions in front of others" (CL 23,380 = GA 0,49,2). It is with humility that we ask pardon for our sins and prepare ourselves to receive Our Lord in the Eucharist (CL 23,398 & 411 = GA 0,23,8 & 0,26,10).

3.3. Humility and prayer (DB)

The *Duties of a Christian* in the question-and-answer form (CL 21 = DB) takes up in full the teachings of GA on humility, but in addition insists on its place in prayer, because “prayer is a request that is made with humility and insistence” (248 = 4,1,12).

For our prayers to be “good and pleasing to God, useful to ourselves and our neighbour”, we have to pray with humility and give external signs of it (255f = 4,3,11). The just do not always obtain what they ask because God “wishes to make them humbler and more abandoned to his holy will” (250 = 4,2,4).

This teaching on prayer assigns a place to humility on the basis of its definition of the word “prayer”. It is a pity, however, that it limits itself to the prayer of petition. There is a more complete definition of prayer in DB, where we read that it is “the raising of our soul to God in order to pay him our respects and to ask him to respond to our needs” (244 = 4,1,2). Later we are given an abbreviated form in everyday language: “Prayer which one makes to God to ask him for some grace [...] is really what is called prayer” (248 = 4,1,12).

3.4. Biblical motivation (DA)

“Humility, which is opposed to pride, is the realisation of our misery and a willing submission to our neighbour” (CL 20,186 = DA 216,1,6). The Lasallian catechism in continuous prose (CL 20 = DA) mentions humility 46 times. Its use is limited to a number of very narrow contexts, such as dispositions for prayer (16 times) and the sacrament of penance (20 times). It adds nothing new to what we find in GA or DB on the humility of a penitent (276 = 306,0,4).

On the other hand, another page in this work (429f = 402,1,13-15) has a whole section on the prayer of the humble person and provides a series of motives all based on the Bible: Abraham’s attitude (Gn 18,27), Judith’s prayer (Jt 8,17 & 9,4) and that of the Publican (Mt 23,12) “granted immediately because of the humility of his prayer”.

3.5. The humility of Jesus and the saints (DC)

The last volume of the *Duties* (CL 22 = DC) runs through the liturgical calendar, inviting the Christian to adore the humility of Jesus on Palm Sunday (161 = 42,7,7), to imitate his humility during his passion (169

= 42,8,14) and to thank him “for having died such a vile and humiliating death for our sins” (57 = 20,11,6).

After contemplating “the mystery of Our Lord”, the Christian is invited to imitate him in his life and actions in the liturgical year. Ash Wednesday (53 = 20,9,7), Lent (85 = 30,6,3) and Eastertime (96 = 30,8,9) are points in the temporal cycle which provide an incentive to be humble.

The feasts of the saints offer a great many models of this virtue. In the incarnation of the Son of God, Mary demonstrated “deep humility when, being chosen to be the mother of God, she said: ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord’” (136 = 42,1,4). Her Birth (199 = 43,2,3), her Visitation (204 = 43,4,3) and her Assumption (210 = 43,5,6) are occasions characterised by humility.

De La Salle invites us to imitate the humility of St Joseph (275f = DC 44,18,5 & 10), of St Michael (221 = 44,3,3) and “the deep humility” of John the Baptist (229 = 44,5,11).

3.6. For those who live in the “world” (RB)

There is nothing really new in the *Instructions and Prayers*. However, the very personal outpourings of affection for Holy Mass, confession and communion give, perhaps, a more human face to Christian humility.

The *Rules of Propriety and Christian Politeness* invite the Christian to be proud of his baptism and of his belonging to the Church, rather than to be humble. All the same, the adjective “shameful” occurs 24 times to describe ways of behaving condemned by politeness, such as wiping the dish clean with bread (CL 19,99 = RB 204,4,263) or kicking people (CL 19,48 = RB 114,1,134).

All in all, in the works intended for Christians as a whole, and particularly for the pupils of the Christian Schools, De La Salle is very restrained in his references to humility. He recommends its practice mainly in contexts such as the prayer of petition, Lent, Holy Week, confession and communion.

According to the author of the *Duties of a Christian*, the first stage of humility is self-knowledge. The second, self-contempt, must go hand-in-hand with the first. While Blain speaks simply of “horror of oneself” (CL 8,408), De La Salle adds self-forgetfulness, as we will see in his writings for the Brothers.

4. IN DE LA SALLE'S WORKS WRITTEN FOR THE BROTHERS

4.1. One of the "principal virtues"

In the 1718 text of the *Common Rules*, the "exercises of humility" which are practised in the Institute seem to be limited to the "self-accusation" of one's faults to the Director (RC 5,7). Neither the "advertisement of defects" (RC 5,9), nor "giving an account of one's conduct" (RC 5,14) is defined as an act of humility.

The Brothers will show "very great moderation and humility" in all their external behaviour (RC 21,13). There is nothing comparable, however, with the degrees of humility mentioned in St Benedict's Rule.

The *Collection* deals specifically with humility as one of "the principal virtues that the Brothers must make sure they practise" (CL 15,154 = R 15). It follows monastic tradition when it says: "Consider this virtue as the foundation of all the other moral virtues, without which one cannot have any solid piety, since piety without humility is usually only pure hypocrisy or illusion" (CL 15,172 = R 15,8,1).

One should "make great efforts to know oneself" and adopt "a low opinion" of oneself (CL 15,173 = R 15,8,2). We return here to the meaning found in GA and DB. If one is accused, one should not justify oneself (CL 15,174 = R 15,8,4), according to a note in DA (CL 20,186 = 216,1,6).

Humility is included also among the "twelve qualities of a good teacher" (CL 15,6 = R 5 & CL 24,228). It is worth pointing out this positive treatment of this virtue.

4.2. During the exercise of mental prayer(EM)

The *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer* uses the term "humility" 136 times. The context is that of prayer, and we have read already that humility is necessary for both adoration and the prayer of petition. The first part of the Method of Mental Prayer includes "acts of humility, confusion and contrition", the second part, "acts of confusion and contrition".

Of particular interest is the model meditation in part two on the virtue of humility. It shows that this virtue is not included in this work for the sake of padding. Its main contribution regarding humility is the list it gives of biblical references to the prayer of the humble person:²

- Gn 18,27: The intercession of Abraham.
- Ps 51 (50): Prayer of the contrite and humble heart.
- The psalms of the humble and poor of Yahweh.
- Lk 18,13f: Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican.
- Jn 13,5f: Example of humility given by Jesus.
- Mt 11,29: Jesus gentle and humble of heart.
- Mt 23,12f: Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled.
- Lk 1,46f: The humility of Mary
- Ph 2,6f: The kenosis of the Son of God.

4.3. With the exaggerated terminology of the times

"Of ourselves, all that we can do is to offend God" we read in EM. Later, we find: "To say I am made of clay and ashes is to pay me excessive honour, for this clay and these ashes are the work of God" (CL 14,49 = EM 5,152f).³

What we read here cannot be taken literally: it is simply the hyperbole typical of a particular literary style. This style is found frequently in 17th century French writings, in both poetry and texts striving for eloquence. All the same, none of this prevents De La Salle from professing an optimistic theological view when he writes: "The most excellent and the greatest creatures that God created are angels and men, and it is even for them that he made all things" (CL 20,19 = DA 103,0,3).

When we turn to the act of adoration we can speak of mystical humility: "I adore you, My Lord Jesus Christ, teaching the holy virtue of humility (prostrate at the feet of your Apostles in order to wash them so as to give me an example)" (CL 14,100 = EM 12,272,2). One feels here that mental prayer is not speculative thinking about a virtue, but contemplation of Jesus in his behaviour, his relationships and his actions (CL 50,477). Humility comes from imitating the person one loves. This probably explains the use of hyperbole we have pointed out. The language of love is not the rigorous language of theology.

4.4. Ascetical humility (MF)

Each of the meditations written by De La Salle is a self-contained literary unit. The importance given to this virtue or that, in this case, humility, differs greatly

from one case to another. The following examples may make this clearer.

The feast of the Circumcision shows us the sovereign Lawgiver submitting himself to a law made for sinners: "Let us admire this day the obedience and humility of our Saviour in this mystery. [...] From the example of Christ you should learn submission to those whom God has given you as Superiors; to humble yourself when occasion requires" (MF 93,1). This is ascetical humility involving the observance of a law, rather loosely based on the submission of Jesus (in human terms, it is the parents of Jesus who fulfil the Law).

St Thomas Aquinas also offers an example of ascetical humility: "Endeavour to emulate this saint's humility since you have nothing within you save what is low and debasing. And to acquire this virtue, cherish humiliations" (MF 108,3).

4.5. Apostolic humility (MF)

De La Salle sees an apostolic dimension in St Francis Xavier's humility: "God gives the grace of converting souls most abundantly to the humble. [...] Do you wish to convert and win over your disciples to God? [...] The more you practise self-abasement [...] the more easily you will touch the hearts of those you instruct" (MF 79,2).

The first point of the meditation for Christmas urges us to have a great love for poverty in union with Jesus who is born poor. The second point adds love of abasement: "In choosing our present state, we should have prepared ourselves for abasement, like the Son of God, when he became man" (MF 86,2). The third point insists on the importance of what we can call the **apostolic humility of conformity**: "Nothing so attracts souls to God as the poverty and humility of those who try to lead them to him. [...] Rest assured that as long as you have a sincere love for poverty and for all that is humiliating, you will produce fruit in souls [...] for you can attract them to God only insofar as you resemble Jesus at his birth" (MF 86,3).

These are the two dimensions, interior and exterior, of the poverty-humility of the apostle, the source of his apostolic success. Elsewhere, De La Salle links humility with the Beatitude of the meek who will possess the land (MD 65,2; CL 20,190 = DA 216,2,7).

4.6. "Self-contempt" (MD)

The *Meditations for Sundays* regularly associate humility with obedience (MD 7,1; 12,2; 21,2), openness of conscience (MD 19,2f; 52,3), and prayer (MD 38,3; 63,2). As a typical example we can use the meditation on the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (MD 63), entitled "On self-contempt".

In the first point we read: "For what esteem does he deserve whose very being does not belong to him, but to God who gave it to him, and who can withdraw it or dissolve it whenever it pleases him?" From what is said here one could think that God was a capricious potentate, an absolute monarch, a ruler inspired by a philosophy preaching that man is despicable — man who was created in the image of God, as De La Salle writes elsewhere (CL 21,21 = DA 103,0,9). Was such a declaration necessary to justify the ascetical statement with which the first point begins: "Self-contempt is one of the most powerful means of acquiring virtue"? Perhaps the quotation from Holy Scripture is preferable: "Of all sin pride is the root" (MD 63,1 quoting Si 10,13).

The second point proposes the prayer of the Publican as a model who "considered himself merely as a great sinner, and humbly petitioned for mercy". For this reason, "because of his humility and simplicity, he went away justified" (MD 63,2).

The third point is more demanding: "Self-contempt can hardly be pushed too far". This is said, however, in the context of mystical conformity to Jesus crucified in a spirit of reparation: "You who have crucified the Son of God a second time by your sins [...] should endeavour to conform to the example of Our Lord by sentiments of humility, and looking upon yourself with the eyes of faith, consider only what is capable of inspiring you with a low idea of yourself before God and men. Since, then, God thwarts the proud and keeps his grace for the humble, you ought, both exteriorly and interiorly, to practise self-abasement and take pleasure therein. You have numerous occasions of doing so in your state and employment" (MD 63,3).

This demanding doctrine is applied to the context of everyday life, but it refers first of all to the union Jesus wishes to have with us through his redeeming incarnation.

We are given an example of humility in Mary when she recognised the action of God within her and “abased herself interiorly before him, acknowledging that she owed everything to him”, and saying within herself what she later expressed in the *Magnificat*: “He who is mighty, he whose name is holy has wrought for me his wonders” (MD 163,3).

4.7. Humility and “love of prayer”

The meditation for Rogation Tuesday, entitled “On the love of prayer”, is similar to MD 63, but its tone is

quite different. We read: “The second reason why God grants everything to those who pray is because of the humility with which they ask for what they need. As the Wise Man says: ‘He laughs at the mocker, grants his favours to the humble’ ” (MD 38,3).

God is pictured here as “one who has a greater wish to bestow his favours upon you than you have to receive them” (MD 38,1). The prayer of the Publican is quoted again and the following conclusion drawn: “When you pray, therefore, let it be with so much humility that God will not be able to refuse anything you ask” (MD 38,3).

5. IN THE LETTERS OF “THE HUMBLE PRIEST” (CL 8,241)

Only one handwritten letter of the Founder speaks of humility. In it he exhorts Brother Denis to accept the humiliations that come to him during the course of the day and not try to avoid them (LA 12,18; cf. LC 69,3).

In general, the Founder’s letters offering guidance to his Brothers are direct and serene in tone. This tone, no doubt, helped them to become more self-aware, the first step towards humility.

In the extracts from letters published by Blain advice regarding humility is abundant. For example, in a letter to a Brother who finds it difficult to accept being reprimanded for his defects, De La Salle writes: “I see now, my very dear Brother, what you want. You are quite willing to declare that you have a great love for humility, that you hold it in high esteem, while at the same time avoiding humiliations as much as you can. What good will it do you to love the virtue while refusing to practise it?” (LI 83,4).

After noting De La Salle’s words of counsel to “a fervent woman religious”, Blain concludes: “The humble priest, wishing to train this religious in the interior life, gave a description of his own. It is clear that this letter gives us a true picture of his own humility and of the low sentiments regarding himself and his neighbour with which it inspired him” (CL 8,241).

Here are some extracts from this letter:

“You must be convinced that your vocation demands of you quite a different degree of humility and quite a different renunciation of the world and its spirit,

and even of yourself, so that what would be tolerated in another person should not seem tolerable in you at all. [...] Ask Our Lord to engrave this humility deep in your heart. [...] If, my dear Sister, you can engrave these sentiments on your heart and live by them, loving abjection, contempt and the rebuffs of others, seeking them and embracing them as being what you deserve, I think that you will have found an efficacious means, perhaps the only means, of drawing down God’s mercy on yourself” (LI 123).

This rather uncompromising language was used by numerous spiritual directors of the 17th century, and they were understood. Elsewhere, the same biographer shows De La Salle having to moderate the spirit of penance and the desire for humiliation of certain of his first Brothers, who were only too ready to follow him along this path (CL 8,248f).

For elite souls, spiritual combat is a battle where no quarter is given, between the spirit of the world and the love of God. It is a tragic battle, for who can say for sure that he is saved? However, it is also an optimistic battle, because it is also Christ’s battle, and he tells us: “Have confidence, I have overcome the world” (MD 1,2; MF 105,3; CL 15,99 = R 12,15).

While not softening the demanding advice in the letter we have quoted, the motives given in meditations 38 and 86 serve as a complement, and give us a glimpse of the Founder’s burning love as it traces out a true way of perfection.

*Commenting on De La Salle's meditation on humility in EM, Brothers Miguel Campos and Michel Sauvage have the following to say: "We would misrepresent the Lasallian message on this subject, it seems to us, if humility were reduced to an individual virtue and, a fortiori, if it were understood in a restrictive and negative sense, as an attitude of fear of responsibilities, of self-distrust paralyzing commitment. In reality, the key to a right understanding of the Lasallian insistence on humility appears to us to be given by the Meditation on Christmas. [...] The community of Brothers was founded in response to the distressful situation of abandoned youth. To reach these young people in order to announce to them the salvation of God, the Brothers become part of the process of the Incarnation of the Son of God. They put aside their own interests, renounce the pursuit of riches and power, so as to draw as close as possible to the humble condition of these forsaken children. Like the children, they live in poverty and obscurity. It is by becoming part of this situation, which associates them with the mystery of God become human, that they fulfil the conditions necessary to make their ministry bear fruit. The meditation for the feast of St Francis Xavier expresses this idea well: 'The more you practise self-abasement, the more you will touch the hearts of those whom you instruct' " (CAMPOS & SAUVAGE, *Encountering God...*, 309f = CL 50,475, quoting MF 79,2).*

¹ Quotations taken from the article on Humility in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* (See bibliography).

² De La Salle does not enlarge on the connection between piety and humility in R, but in MF 161,3 he says: "Your Institute may be very useful to the Church, but rest assured that it will be so only insofar as it is built on these two foundations, namely, piety and humility. These will render it unshakable". MR 203,1 shows the zeal of Jesus in his treatment of the Pharisees: "Because he could not tolerate their hypocrisy, false religion, nor the pride which led them to think highly of their own actions and praise themselves, while belittling and blaming the behaviour of others". No doubt, because piety, which puts us into a cor-

rect relationship with God, presupposes in doing so that we know and esteem ourselves only in accordance with God's views.

³ The end of this act of humility encompasses the wider vision of biblical thinking. "He is able to situate humility as a fundamentally joyful attitude of the person with whom this so great God forms an alliance to the point of being entirely in him. [...] The act of humility, far from turning us back on ourselves, turns us towards God with enthusiasm, as an offering: 'You wish me to be entirely yours'. One could even recite the words of consecration thinking of the formula of vows: 'I consecrate myself entirely to you'" (CAMPOS & SAUVAGE, 188f = CL 50,354).

Complementary themes

Conversion
Gentleness
Inspirations
Joy

Mortification
Penitent
Poor
Renunciation-Detachment

Sacraments
Salvation
Silence
Spirit of Christianity
World

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALPHONSE, Fr. (GUILHEM M.), *À l'école de saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, Paris, Ligel, 1952, p. 171f.

CAMPOS MARINO, M.A., *L'itinéraire évangélique de SJBS et le recours à l'Écriture dans ses 'Méditations pour le temps de retraite'*, CL 45, Rome, 1989.

CAMPOS, M., and SAUVAGE, M., *Encountering God in the Depths of the Mind and Heart, A commentary on JBS's Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer*, Translated by O. Murdoch, Rome, 1995 (French text: CL 50, Rome, 1989).

Dictionnaire de spiritualité, Vol. 7.1, article on *Humilité* by Pierre ADNES, Paris, Beauchesne, 1969.

POUTET, Y., *Le XVII^e siècle et les origines lasalliennes*, Rennes, 1970.

SAUVAGE, M., and CAMPOS, M., *John Baptist de La Salle, Announcing the Gospel to the Poor*, translated by Matthew J. O'Connel. Romeoville, 1991, p.170f.

Br Odon RAZAFIDRAKOTO and Br Alain HOURY