

8. COMMANDMENTS OF GOD AND OF THE CHURCH

Summary:

1. The Context 2. The Commandments of God. 2.1. General presentation. 2.2 Love as the essence of the Christian life. 2.3 From justice to purity. – 3. The Commandments of the Church.

1. THE CONTEXT

The call to the catechetical ministry met with different reactions within the French Church where responses gradually emerged which were both more or less complete, depending on their location, and also progressively more numerous.

The faith which De La Salle wanted to cultivate through religious education was a living faith which would be expressed in divine worship and affect daily life. The “knowledge” which had to be transmitted was not various ideas about God but rather the living and true God himself. This Christian initiation involved moral education in that it involved learning about what is appropriate to sons of God. Thus, it is not difficult, for example, in following the order of the commandments, to list the Christian duties in which children must be formed. There is a marked insistence, too, on the ideal that the Christian life is summarized in love.

The Lasallian focus on the commandments must be sought primarily in the catechetical texts since there is little or no mention of the theme in MD, MF, R, RC, EM, RB or CE. The focus presented was inevitably in tune with the time and,

thus, in harmony with the guidelines indicated in the **Roman Catechism** with its three-part structure of truths to be believed, commandments to be observed, and sacraments to be received as means of salvation. Christianity was thus presented with a triple “what one must do/what is necessary” stress which placed more emphasis on “the burden” than on “Good News”. De La Salle preferred to present a synthesis of doctrine, maxims, commandments and sacraments (Da 66; Db 63; Ga 341). Thus, on 13 occasions, and with the same formula each time, he linked “the commandments of God and of the Church” although, obviously, he analysed them separately. On 8 occasions he termed the commandments as “holy”. The overall effect of this emphasis was to present a somewhat joyless image of Christianity in which the fear of eternal condemnation eclipsed the joy of salvation.

According to De La Salle, one’s conscience must be examined in the light of the commandments of God and of the Church as well as from the perspective of the capital sins and of the sins particular to one’s state, profession or employment (Db 181). However, it was not his style to make excessive use of adjectives and thus only

very infrequently does he allude simply, for example, “to the great commandment of the law” (Da 40; MR 204).

2. THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD

His exposition of the commandments of God is presented in the context of charity. Thus we read in Da 89: “Chapter 1: On charity which leads us to love God”.

2.1. General presentation

The structural centre of Canisius’s catechism revolved around the three theological virtues. However, from the second part of the 17th century other perspectives emerged in the realm of catechetics. Thus, for example, in the Decalogue which De La Salle presented, he focused on the love of God and of one’s neighbour, a focus which appeared either as an introduction (as in Da) or as an epilogue. In Da (89-101), for example, thirteen pages on charity serve as an introduction to a detailed and particular study of each of the commandments with the only exception being the 9th and 10th which are treated together (Da 147-151). However, in the catechism of questions and answers, two different groupings of the commandments are presented which, in some ways, are more logical - ie. the 6th and 9th (Db 99-102) and the 7th and 10th (Db 103-106). In his exposition of the commandments the dominant stress is on “duty”; hence, for example, the presentation of the “second treatise on the second duty of a Christian which is to love God” (Da 102).

The authors of the Catechisms liked to synthesise all the commandments in two — i.e. love of God and love of one’s neighbour — which reflected the division of the Decalogue; thus the first three commandments embrace one’s duties with regard to God while the rest indicate one’s duties towards one’s neighbour (Da 102).

The didactical significance of the Decalogue must be seen in the fact that faith and morality are inseparably linked. The explanation of each commandment must find its inspiration in the prologue (Ex 20,2; Dt. 5,6) since confidence in God who brings to life, saves and liberates, has its re-

percussions in an existential project. Whoever experiences himself in debt to God with respect to, for example, life, liberty, rights, happiness, property must, at the same time, also find himself respecting and guaranteeing the life, rights, happiness and property of his neighbour. In this way, the life of the believer is transformed into worship of God in which the manifestation of God’s love finds expression in daily living with one’s neighbour.

The original contribution of De La Salle to popular education cannot be understood if it is distanced from a spirituality which is expressed in a deep personal experience. He wanted the pupil to be touched in such a way that he would give himself unreservedly to God — and De La Salle was not afraid to propose such an ideal. The sanctity which he lived and which he preached unfolded at the heart of daily life because, for him, there was no dichotomy between faith and life, between the Gospel and earthly realities, between love of God and love of one’s neighbour.

The commandments of the law represent the clear will of God and are applicable to all men in whatever situation they find themselves. They are an external imperative for man presented as an objective. The extent of these duties with regard to God demands an appeal to grace and it is within this perspective that the sacraments have their role since they constitute “the primary means of obtaining the grace necessary to fulfill one’s duties with respect to God” (Da 199).

“All that God has commanded us to do is expressed in the practice of charity since, as Jesus assures us in the Holy Gospel, all the commandments depend on this” (Da 90). This reality, that the fulness of the law is rooted in love, underlines both the general and detailed description of the Decalogue by De La Salle (Da 90-91).

One must “observe all the commandments”, “fulfill them”, and “keep them exactly”. Each commandment orders, or commands, and is directed at the performance of specific “duties” and prohibits specific actions; thus, for example, we are “to accomplish the good which God requires of us and to avoid the evil — sin — which he forbids” (Db 77). To contravene or transgress the commandments is equivalent to sinning. There is reference to “grave” and “enormous” sins against

the 6th commandment (Da 133-134) while in Db 101 it asserts that “these are the normal cause of the Christian’s condemnation”.

The opening of “the Meditations for the Time of Retreat” gives a perspective which sets the tone for the whole Lasallian task; “God is so good that, once having created man, he desired that all come to the knowledge of the truth which is God himself, and all that he has willed to reveal to us through Jesus Christ, through the holy Apostles and through the Church. God wishes that this knowledge be brought to all men so that their minds are enlightened by the light of faith”.

From this stems De La Salle’s insistence on “instructing”, “teaching”, or “explaining” doctrine “well” in that he sees this as the armour or protection for maintaining the truths of faith and overcoming ignorance. In this he is following the imperative of an education which has, as its ultimate objective, the formation of students as good Christians as well as providing them with a good “secular” education. He was thus aiming at the inculcation of effective knowledge — the transmission of the truths of faith in such a way that the heart would be moved to practise them.

In this exposition, we may note, from a contemporary perspective, the absence of references to personal or community experience as well as to new issues raised by changing times. Neither the originality of people nor their capacity to make decisions — nor even their task of appropriation — was to find much room for expression in former times. The classical catechisms made use of the deductive method which gradually became more and more inappropriate giving way to the rediscovery of the method particular to kerygmatic catechesis which is expressed in three movements - i.e. implication or involvement, explanation and application.¹

2.2. Love as the essence of the Christian life

De La Salle insists that the essence of the Christian life lies in love which calls for extraordinary courage; “...The main indication that we can give of our love of God and of our neighbour is that we keep the holy commandments of God faithfully and exactly since the person who loves God must want what He wants and do what He

commands... and because the commandments which we have received from Him oblige us to truly love Him as well as our neighbour” (Da 102).

To fulfill the commandments in this way is equivalent to love as expressed in 1 Jn 4,20 (Db 75-76). It is the requirement demanded of his followers by St. John who repeatedly reiterates that they should love one another, “...Because, he said, it is the commandment of the Lord, and if one keeps it faithfully all the others will be kept faithfully since it contains them all” (Dc 253). A similar emphasis is found in the prayer in EM 113 which, in addressing God, says “loving you and keeping your commandments”. Thus, love which is to glow must be warmed in the crucible which is the observance of the Decalogue.

This chronological reading of the Lasallian writings offers no significantly new insight with regard to the notion of charity. From the outset it embraces the double love of God and of one’s neighbour and, in a special way, it is related to faith without neglecting the link with hope (Da 89, 93, 112-113, 125). The expressions of adoration and obedience to the will of God integrate the totality of love (Da 96, 98, 102) since love of the Creator implies love of the creatures whom he has created.

The Church itself has its origins in love (Da 64, 66) and charity figures as the distinguishing mark of the true disciple of Jesus Christ. Thus, after God, who is the disciple called to love? Man, whether he be friend or enemy (Da 131), sinner or righteous, Christian or not. As for those in Purgatory, they are expecting the “infusion” of the “lumen gloriae” while those who are on pilgrimage in a strange land will not reach the bank of eternity without the intermediary bridge of their neighbour. It is the invitation to discover in the brother lying on the road from Jerusalem to Jerico a person who comes from God and is journeying towards Him.

There are different phases to love — from that purely human instinct to the state of sacrifice in maturity when one yearns to love everybody irrespective of whether it is commanded or not. The multi-coloured stained-glass images in the “Sainte Chapelle” give the impression of a grisaille when viewed from outside but burst into light when viewed from within the centre of the nave as the

sun illumines the greatness of the paschal mystery. This is an image of the Christian life transformed by the brilliant heat of deep love and seen from a perspective transfigured by the stained-glass imagery of charity.

2.3. From justice to purity

From the beginning of the 17th century the majority of Catechisms made no mention of justice and the social order in their explanation of the 7th commandment. At the same time the 6th commandment began to receive greater emphasis in what was a significant evolution since fidelity to the text of Exodus concentrated attention on charity towards one's neighbour expressed in terms of justice. The new stress was on the preservation of the innocence of children and it was here that purity received its emphasis while the explanations of the 7th commandment no longer stigmatised social disorders. Moreover, the impact of this child-centred influence in Catechisms was to be felt in the commentaries on the rest of the commandments. With regard to the contents and the applications of the commandments, the Founder takes a balanced position. He dedicates four pages to the 6th commandment (Da 132, 136) and very little more to the 7th (Da 136-141) although the prominence he gives to justice is clear (oa 129, 137-138, 140-141). From the perspective of his predecessors, social evil was rooted in the unjust distribution of riches and De La Salle introduced this theme with great delicacy. If the 7th commandment "forbids the taking of goods which belong to others, it also obliges the rich, and those who have goods, to share them with the poor according to their needs and possibilities" (Da 138) and he equates the failure to give with committing an injustice. From this is derived the duty to give alms which "in cases of extreme necessity" is obliged "under pain of mortal sin" (Da 139).

When De La Salle composed D, social evil was understood to nestle in the heart in the form of impurity (Da 103; Db 78). In consequence, there followed his denunciation with respect to a series of sinful occasions which imperil the Christian life; for example, bad companions, being with the opposite sex frequently, luxuries, meals, dances, idleness (Da 134). Eight such examples are also men-

tioned, with slight variations, in Db 102.

In brief, the commandments of the second part of the Decalogue indicate charity towards one's neighbour. More or less all the Catechisms of the time emphasized the attention which Christians must pay to the underprivileged while the concept of charity, in its positive sense, frequently covered alms-giving and, in its negative sense, justice. Once he has clarified, at the beginning of the Decalogue, that the commandments are related to the precept of love and defined who is one's neighbour, De La Salle does not return to the theme of charity² although he will say something about "enemies" and about "the poor" in treating of prayer and in his commentary on the Our Father (cf. Da 447-448; 455; Db 283-284).

3. THE COMMANDMENTS OF THE CHURCH

De La Salle takes great care to solidly establish ecclesial authority; "...The reason why we must listen to the Church as to Jesus Christ, and as to God himself, and respect its decisions with regard to faith and doctrine, as well as many other articles of faith, is because the Church has the same authority as Jesus Christ who is the foundation and support of truth and, as he assured us through St. Peter, it will never grow weak in faith". The concomitant attitude of the Christian is thus indicated by De La Salle: "...we must submit ourselves to all its decisions in matters of faith and religion with the same simplicity with which we receive the Gospel" (Da 72). The continuing action of Jesus in the Church is forcefully underlined as follows; "... building it each day, uniting the faithful in the same society; just as he gave them laws so now he knows and guides them through the mysterious action of the Spirit" (Da 73) who encourages this family through grace and charity which "is poured into the hearts of the faithful in Baptism" (Da 66). Christian activity binds the disciples of the Lord in communion with the Church which, as with any other institution, has its norms. Thus, "...The Church, in consequence of possessing the same authority as Jesus Christ, as well as being our Mother, can command us as children in virtue of this title; and all Christ-

ians who publicly profess submission are obliged to observe all its commandments under pain of mortal sin” (Da 151).

As to what these commandments are: “...six are normally presented which all Catholics are obliged to observe with the same care and fidelity as the commandments of God” (Da 152). With regard to the order, there are variations; thus, in Db 113 the order of the first two commandments of the Church is reversed while the subsequent explanation follows the more traditional order which has already been explained in Da 152-154. The list of the six commandments, far from being fixed in the 17th century, fluctuated between five and seven, and sometimes there were more. Such was the case in La Chetardye’s catechism which presented nine commandments. Thus, while there certainly existed a strong tradition with regard to the commandments of the Church, the actual contents were variable. Consequently, the Lasallian listing of the commandments concludes as follows; “...There also exists other commandments of the Church which are less common” (Da 159) and it goes on to mention one of the most important as being “not to communicate with those who have been excommunicated”. The Church thus has the power to formulate laws, to order and forbid. The model of Church presented was authoritarian and hierarchical, a model which was far removed from the image of the living community acting through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Against this background the Founder’s presentation can be seen as being consistent with the theological thought of his time. There was no alternative for the Christian than to observe, honour and keep all the commandments of the Church. In summary, the Christian’s duty was to obey with the alternative being the risk of falling into various sins. From a negative point of view he strongly accentuates Easter communion and with regard to those who do not observe this commandment “the Church wishes that, after being warned by their priest two or three times, they should be excommunicated if they have not submitted.” (Da 157). It is an emphasis that invites a contrast between

this schematized exposition of the commandments of the Church and the breath of life running through the clear, biblical-patristically, inspired commentary on the Decalogue. As an example suffice it to refer to the third commandment, “...One must not believe that it is sufficient to hear Mass every Sunday in order to have fulfilled this commandment of God and of the Church... As St Gregory says, one leaves aside normal work on Sunday with the aim of applying oneself completely to prayer and, in so doing, to repair the negligence which might have occurred in the service of God during the rest of the week” (Da 120-121). There existed a danger in the 17th century, a danger which may also persist to-day, of insisting exclusively on the exact fulfillment of laws without sufficiently underlining the Christian character of morality leading to the repeated temptation to define the minimum required or to define the limits between mortal and venial sin.

In the following paragraph the Holy Founder demonstrates the fundamental aspiration towards the absolute which is the heart of morality;

“...It is the intention of the Church that the faithful dedicate the morning to assistance at the blessing of the water, the procession, the sermon and the Parish Mass and that they are frequently prepared to receive the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. In the evening they should assist at a sermon or at catechism as well as attending Vespers and Compline. If there is any remaining time after these Parish activities it is very appropriate that parents make use of it to instruct their children, or to insure that they read a good book, or visit a Church, or visit prisoners, or the poor in their homes or in hospitals, or visit other pious people with whom they can maintain union and charity” (Da 120-121). What a marvellous description of Christian living!

¹ FOSSION A., *La catéchèse dans le champ de la communication. Ses enjeux par l’inculturation*. Cerf, Paris, 1990, pp. 178-179.

² DHOTEL J-C., *Les origines du Catéchisme Moderne d’après les premiers manuels imprimés en France*. Aubier, Paris, 1967, p. 398.

Complementary Themes:

Love - Charity; Catechism; Duties; Faith - the Spirit of Faith; Instruction - instructing children; Justice; Sacraments; The Will of God.

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