

80. IMITATION OF CHRIST

80.A. THE FOLLOWING OF CHRIST

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1. DEFINITION OF SOME TERMS

1.1. The word "imitation" in the language of the time

We can begin with an example that seems representative. It is taken from P. Richelet's *Nouveau Dictionnaire François* (Amsterdam, 1709), which defines *imitation* as follows: "It is the effort a person makes to try to walk in the footsteps of someone who has done something worthy to serve as a model".

While some of the words used in the definition have the same meaning as they do in De La Salle's writ-

ings, others are used differently by him, a procedure not uncommon among authors.

- "It is an effort": It involves exercise, which can be painful. It is not simply a matter of admiration.

- "to try": Effort comes from an act of will, a personal decision. For De La Salle, however, imitation in the context of the imitation of Christ does not depend solely on effort: it is a gratuitous grace from God. And yet, at the same time, a person is not dispensed

from making an effort of the will and asking for this grace in prayer.

- "Walk in the footsteps of someone": What is involved here is not a single action, but a process, a lifetime of following the path marked out for us by the Other. This image goes beyond that of physical imitation: it suggests we move forward as we follow. It is more dynamic and implies a relationship: we follow a person and not an idea.

- "Model": This is the term we use to describe a person or a thing we try to reproduce or assimilate by observing, but which nevertheless remains outside of ourselves. Here too, De La Salle does not accept the definition given, namely, that what is imitated remains outside, does not become part of our being. He insists that the imitation of Christ, far from limiting itself to the reproduction of external characteristics, much reach the point when it takes on the spirit of Jesus Christ, so that this spirit can act in us in a wholly interior way.

1.2. The imitation of Jesus Christ in the writings of De La Salle

We cannot limit our analysis to the actual use of the word "imitation" in De La Salle's writings, even if it is associated with Christ: we need to consider the idea itself from a much broader perspective. In doing so, we will discover that, when this word is used, it behaves like the horizon: when you try to get close to it, all you see is a vista that seems to go on forever.

We could look at this question from the point of view of profundity, moving from "imitation" to "following" and then to "conformity" and "union". Among other things, we would notice, as we moved from one level down to another, that the word "imitation" becomes more frequent in De La Salle's writings. This shift in meaning is not always clear-cut: what we observe is rather continuity, or even better still, a sort of superimposition. What is clear, however, is that with

all these different levels and shades of meaning, De La Salle is describing a process in which the imitation of Christ is the threshold that has to be crossed in order to enter into the mystery of Christ and finally achieve identification with him.

It is a process of interiorisation by which De La Salle leads us from the external to the interior, from acts to attitudes, from "doing like" to "feeling like", from external conformity to a conformity of sentiments and intentions, from imitating him to living his mystery, from following him to allowing oneself to be used by his Spirit.

In order to understand this process as De La Salle saw it, it is useful to compare the use made of images or titles referring to Jesus. In the whole of De La Salle's works, the more static and passive word "model" is used only a dozen times with reference to Jesus Christ. "Master", on the other hand, with its more dynamic and personalising meaning and its stress on the fundamental role of Christ, is used four times more frequently. Used even more frequently is "Saviour", which at the same time expresses the initiative of Christ and refers to his redeeming incarnation, in which we are called to participate.

If we consider the classic distinction made in the imitation and following of Christ between the ascetic and the mystical, we find a dynamic balance in De La Salle's writings between the two poles represented by man's efforts and his openness to grace. While each seems to require the other, it is clear that De La Salle is strongly attracted by the idea of **God's initiative**. That is why De La Salle, while retaining the bipolarity mentioned above, maintains that imitation of Christ can take place only within a mystical process, in which the Spirit of Jesus reveals himself as its prime mover. Far from being a human achievement, the imitation of Christ consists in being open to the movement of the Spirit who can accomplish in us and through us the mystery of salvation.

2. CHRISTOCENTRICITY IN THE FRENCH SCHOOL OF SPIRITUALITY

It would be difficult to describe here the extent to which De La Salle's thinking on this topic was influenced by the various contemporary and earlier thinkers who are said to belong to the 17th century French

school of spirituality. Since christology is an essential element of Christian spirituality, it is not surprising that the Founder of the Christian Schools treated it at length in his writings. With his usual eclecticism,¹

he included in these not only his own personal experience, but also the contributions of a number of authors to whom he had access.

There is no doubt, however, that his principal source of inspiration is to be found in the Gospels and in the letters of St Paul. This is clearly borne out by the profusion of New Testament quotations which characterise his writings.

And then, as a man of his times, De La Salle shared in the christocentricity of the French school of spirituality. The words of St Paul quoted so often by Pierre de Bérulle: "I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ" (Ga 20,2), are very much present also in De La Salle's writings, either as a quotation or as an allusion.

De La Salle came into contact with this rich source of christology when he spent 18 months at the seminary founded by Jean Jacques Olier at St Sulpice in Paris. While he was there, he was able to read and meditate on the following text among others, in the spiritual directory of the seminary:

"The first and last aim of this Institute should be to live totally for God in Jesus Christ Our Lord, in such a way that the inner being of his Son may enter the very depth of our heart, and that each one may say what St Paul said so confidently about himself: 'I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ'. For all of us here, this should be the only expectation and the only thought. All activity should be directed towards living interiorly the life of Christ and manifesting it by the actions of our mortal bodies".²

There are other areas also in which De La Salle's writings reflect the thinking of the French school:

- Doing everything in union with Jesus: "We should never act except in union with him, and under his direction and inspiration" (P. de Bérulle).³

- Conforming oneself to Christ, reproducing his virtues, especially his "crucifying" virtues: "We are obliged to become conformable to Jesus Christ, as St Paul teaches us. [...] In order to know with certainty if you love him, examine yourself to see if you have a firm desire to conform yourself to Jesus Christ, if you want to reproduce his virtues in yourself, especially his crucifying virtues, such as his poverty, his humility, his mortification and his patience; and if you really wish to have all his dispositions" (J.J. Olier).⁴

- It is the Holy Spirit who makes us like Jesus Christ: "To be a true Christian, we need to have in us the Holy Spirit who can make us live interiorly and externally like Jesus Christ" (J.J. Olier).⁵

We find frequent references to these ideas in De La Salle's writings. However, this agreement on basic ideas does not lead to mimicry on his part. His own charism inspires him to stress what he feels is appropriate. For example, we see that he does not stress a recurring theme in Bérullian christology: "Jesus Christ as the worshipper *par excellence* of the Father". Instead, he concentrates on Jesus Christ as God incarnate and on his redemptive mission. The reason for this difference in emphasis probably stems from De La Salle's wish to highlight the role of the ministerial role of the Christian educator as "co-redeemer".

3. THE IMITATION AND FOLLOWING OF CHRIST IN THE LIFE OF DE LA SALLE

Before looking more closely at De La Salle's teachings regarding the imitation and following of Christ, we need to examine De La Salle's own life as a disciple of Jesus Christ. We can find in his life certain indications which will help us to understand his writings better.⁶

3.1. A process of incarnation

From the moment De La Salle became involved with the work of the schools, his life became a process of "kenosis", of leaving one world behind to join

another, of renunciation of security and privilege, of detachment from material and cultural goods. He had to be born again among people he had formerly considered inferior to his valet (CL 7,169), and become as if one of them. He opened his heart to their needs and accepted to serve them. This was the origin of the "Christian Schools". Despite the obvious similarity between De La Salle's steps and those of Jesus, one can hardly call it mimicry: there is no desire to repeat gestures, nor to resemble the prophet from Nazareth externally, nor to copy his most heroic attitudes.⁷

If there is a resemblance, it is because De La Salle sees every event and every human relationship as a “kairos” — a manifestation of God. His awareness of participating in the work of God leads him to accept his own life history as salvation history. It is there that identification with Christ takes place, the Christ of the mystery of the incarnation and salvation. We will understand the various steps of this process of identification with Christ better if we analyse the event with which it culminated: the renunciation of his family wealth and his canonry.⁸

Towards the middle of 1682, De La Salle took a decisive step regarding his commitment to gratuitous schools for the poor: he left his own house and went to live with the teachers. It was a time when they were being assailed by one of their worst temptations: anxiety about their lack of future security. De La Salle invited them to abandon themselves into the hands of Providence. Only in this way would they be able to strengthen their stability and at the same time ensure the continued existence of the schools. The biographers, especially Blain, put a long speech on the lips of the Founder,⁹ to which the teachers replied by accusing De La Salle of being comfortably off thanks to his inherited wealth and canonry. With such security he was hardly in a position to invite them to trust in Providence. In the face of this challenge, De La Salle began a period of discernment which he ended by going to consult Fr Barré. His reply was a commentary on a Gospel text:

“The foxes have holes and the birds of the sky have their nests and a place to shelter, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

“The foxes”, he said, “are the children of this world who are attached to the goods of this earth. The birds of the sky are religious who have a cell in which to shelter. But those who, like you, devote themselves to teaching the poor, must not have any other wealth on this earth besides that of the Son of Man.

“And so, you must not only dispose of all your wealth, but also give up your canonry and live in the total absence of anything that could distract you from procuring God’s glory”.¹⁰

All three biographers report this event and realise that what is at stake is much more than giving up wealth and a canonry: it is a vocation, it is De La Salle’s unconditional response to God’s call to him to accomplish his work. The outcome of this critical situ-

ation was De La Salle’s decision to dispose of his wealth and canonry in order to devote himself definitively to the schools, with Providence as his only support.

3.2. With clear consequences

If we base ourselves on the form of Barré’s advice, and on the words attributed by Blain to De La Salle when he gives his reasons for making his final choice, we can draw five conclusions:

1. The choice De La Salle made was in the context of following Christ. He does not try to put into practice a passage from the Gospel, or imitate the poverty and detachment of Christ while he was on earth. The a priori approach which starts with the written Word of God and tries to apply it to everyday life; which reduces the Gospel to a collection of examples to be followed; or which uses the historical Jesus as a model to be copied as faithfully as possible, all this is totally alien to De La Salle’s thinking. His motive was not even to give the teachers an example of abandonment to God’s Providence. This may have been a consequence of what he did, but it was not the aim he had in view.
2. De La Salle’s decision was one more element in the development of his vocation. This process was both a “memory” and a “plan” for the future. The memory included all the commitments he had undertaken under God’s guidance and which had pointed him in a particular direction. Continuing along the path would lead to the accomplishment of God’s plan. He wondered whether to continue in the direction indicated, and found the answer, not by reading unrelated scriptural passages, but in the challenge of living persons, the teachers.
3. On finding the correct answer would depend the successful accomplishment of the plan which is none other than the “work of God”, not visualised in abstract terms, but already existing in the two or three schools he had taken charge of. As he had observed, it was there that God’s work of salvation was accomplished. It was by contributing to God’s work that he shared in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and accomplished his work. It was of this that Fr Barré reminded De La Salle when he spoke of the vocation and mission of the teachers.
4. The question De La Salle had to answer was: How to bring God’s salvation to those God had entrusted

to him? In the process of discernment that would follow, he would, of course, obtain enlightenment from Holy Scripture, but not read in solitude, but in dialogue with those who accompanied him on his journey in life. He tries to respond to God's call in the situation in which he received it.

5. Finally, he believed that the accomplishment of God's work required him to live with the teachers in community and to set aside anything that would hinder this. The bond linking him to them required him to share their insecurity, instead of trying to remedy it by purely human means, by using his wealth to help the work of the schools. And so, he and the teachers placed their trust in the Providence of the God who had called them to undertake his work.

This moment of crisis in the life of De La Salle reveals one of the key elements of life in the footsteps of Christ: fidelity, not to the letter, but to the spirit of the Gospel; not to a past history of salvation that ought to be repeated, but to the history of salvation taking place today in the concrete circumstances of life and situations in which God places us. The imitation of Christ does not consist in copying slavishly a model, but in becoming part of the process of incarnation begun by him and continued today in every believer. This process leads to God because it accomplishes the work of God, the mission received by Christ from his Father, and in which our vocation calls us to participate.

During this period of discernment which led De La Salle to become totally detached, we can see the experimental basis of what he will express in theological terms in his *Meditations*: the real moving force behind the process of following and identifying oneself with Christ is not the initiative of the individual person, but the Spirit. Through his own experience of total abandonment to the Spirit of Christ, De La Salle came to the conclusion that he was accomplishing not his own work, but that of God, and that he had to allow him to lay the foundation.

3.3. In search of communion and service

In the second place, De La Salle's participation in the Mystery of Christ is characterised by the search for communion and service in order to build up the newly born community.

The search for communion will lead him to build a community inspired by love, by fraternal relations

and the spirit of the Beatitudes. This communion has to be built up from within. Let us return to the event in De La Salle's life we have just referred to. In the coming together of the various life journeys involved — De La Salle's, the teachers' and Barré's — the Word of God took on power and reality. The Word of God ceases to be speculative and comes to life in this mutual challenge and, by bringing into existence communion among the persons involved, creates the community.

The parallels established by Barré are both strange and enlightening. With the three terms he takes from the Gospel — the foxes, the birds of the sky and the Son of Man — he links three others: the children of this world, religious and teachers who devote themselves to the instruction of the poor. The first two serve to highlight the third. And so, Nicolas Barré says the following to the canon from Rheims:

1. That the mystery of salvation incarnated in the Son of Man is already being fulfilled in the lives of these teachers who help poor children.
2. That this mystery, the same in Christ as in the teachers, implies total dependence on Divine Providence, because it is God's work, and he gives it a foundation.
3. That he himself, who is already participating in the saving mystery of Christ because he is in communion with these teachers, must extend his participation to the very end, strengthening this communion and adopting the insecure situation of the teachers. This is the issue at stake behind the call he hears to accept his vocation.

In their commentaries, the biographers try to give a hagiographical sense to Barré's thinking. They make the call to his vocation consist in an invitation to imitate certain aspects of the life of Christ, to become more perfect, to offer a personal example to the teachers. Barré, on the contrary, inverts the perspective: the centre of gravity is not to be found in De La Salle, in his concern for personal virtue or the imitation of Christ, but in the teachers, that is, in the mission they accomplish and in which the Mystery of Christ is fulfilled.

It is in total communion with the teachers and their mission that the process of incarnation that De La Salle has begun will mature, and that the vocation to which God calls him will gradually take form, as he himself pointed out in his *Memoir on the Beginnings* (CL 10,105f).

This kind of “inversion” in the following of Christ which takes place once a mission is shared, appears frequently in De La Salle’s writings for the Brothers, as a reflection of his own personal experience. Within this communion, De La Salle insists that his position as Founder and Superior of the community includes the essential dimension of service.

In this instance also, the biographers mislead us, considering that the attitude of De La Salle was intended to serve as an example. But De La Salle’s approach to the building up of the Brothers’ community was not based on furnishing an example, by centring everything on himself, but on the exercise of a ministry, centring everything on the mission accomplished by the Brothers. That is to say, he helps the Brothers to understand the mission they are fulfilling **C a mission of salvation**, representing Christ C and how on this mission their community and their personal salvation are founded. He helps them also to seek perfection, not for its own sake, but because it is needed for the accomplishment of their saving mission, and so that the Mystery of Christ can be clearly seen through them.

We find here another example of “off-centring inversion”, which occurs frequently in De La Salle’s writings: he assumes authority as Superior of the community to exercise a role of leadership for the spiritual benefit of his Brothers. As we see in *The Rules I have imposed upon myself*, De La Salle exercised authority as “taking the place of Our Lord” (CL 10,115 = EP 3,0,7). Basically this is a representation of the fatherhood of God who has entrusted him with the accompaniment of his Brothers. As a father, he hopes that the fraternal communion that has begun will reach its full maturity.¹¹ This explains his obsession with divesting himself of his authority. Here, too, the biographers stress the humility of De La Salle, but once again they miss the point: it is the community that is central here. De La Salle wants to see his community takes its destiny into its own hands and take responsibility for its mission. Deep down, there is his humility, of course, but it is not a reason. It is rather a point of view which enables him to see that the place in which the mission, the “work of God”, is successfully carried out is the community. This explains his attitude which is similar to that of John the Baptist: he wishes the mission to grow while he himself diminishes.

3.4. Participation in the saving mission

The third permanent component we see in De La Salle’s life is his participation in Christ’s saving mission among the poor. Initially rather gradually, but later more radically, De La Salle involves himself with the work of the schools, which he sees as a liberating structure for the children of the artisans and the poor. He did not arrive at this commitment as the result of theoretical consideration, nor because he wished to apply the teachings of the Gospel. His reasons — although certainly rooted in his sensitivity to the Gospels and his docility to the Spirit — are based rather on his contact with the needs of the schoolmasters of Rheims and, through them, with the abandoned state of the children of the artisans and the poor, who touched his heart and moved him to respond creatively. He felt that God loved them through him and wished to save them, having himself “enlightened the heart of those he had chosen” to be his ministers (MR 193,1).

From that point onwards, there began the search for and the establishment of the structures necessary for this liberation: gratuitous teaching, daily regulations, training of teachers, development of “ministerial” attitudes, consecration by vows, the lay character of the Institute, etc. And so there matured an awareness of ministry which led the teachers to adopt a lifestyle, whose evangelical character and, in particular, its poverty, enabled the Brothers to be seen as visible signs of Jesus Christ and to be recognised as “saviours” of the poor. These are the terms used by De La Salle in his meditation for Christmas Day in which, exceptionally, he uses “we” when referring to the process of incarnation which has led him and the Brothers to resemble Jesus Christ, not as a result of *a priori* imitation, but because of their ministry: “In choosing our present state, we should have prepared ourselves for abasement, like the Son of God when he became man, for lowliness is the characteristic of our profession and our employment. We are poor Brothers. [...] Only the poor come to us” (MF 86,2).

Having drawn close to them, De La Salle recognises “Jesus Christ under the poor rags of the children” (MF 96,3). He concentrates all his efforts on making them discover their dignity as sons of God to the point of becoming totally free, so that he can finally see them being brought up “in the Christian spirit” (MR 207,3). During the course of this process, which he interprets with the eyes of faith, De La Salle becomes convinced — and he passes on this conviction

tion to his Brothers — that the work of the schools which God has entrusted to them (cf. MR 207,3) is an integral part of Christ's redemptive work (cf. MR 195,1), and makes them ministers of God, "dispensers of his mysteries" (MR 205,1) and "ambassadors of Jesus Christ" (MR 201,2).

This new insight gained from De La Salle's life invites us to see the act of becoming sharers in Jesus' saving mission and mystery, not as an act of will or an intellectual decision, but as the consequence of human experience: it is the result of a life open to the inspirations of the Spirit which, from one commitment to another has become by the Father's will part of the redeeming work of Christ (cf. MR 195,1).

3.5. The following of Christ, a dimension of the Brother's life

In a document handed down to us by Blain under the title: *The Rules I have imposed upon myself* (CL 10,114f = EP 3,0,1f), and which resembles our modern "personal programme", we see how De La Salle understands the following of Christ.¹²

Rule 5 reads as follows: "I will unite my actions to those of Our Lord at least twenty times a day and try to have views and intentions conformable to his". If we look beyond the form taken by this rule (e. g. 20 times), we see that, in speaking of his wish to be united with Christ, De La Salle stresses, not external imitation, but conformity with the views and intentions of Christ. It is these views and intentions which constitute for De La Salle the "here and now". In De La Salle's life, the point of reference is the very centre of salvation history, which is not some past event, but the work of God accomplished in Christ in the here and now. His concern to be faithful to the present

moment is reflected in various "rules" (10, 13,14, 15, 18). which express his awareness of being an instrument of Christ's saving mystery through the mission that has been entrusted to him. In the same way, when De La Salle proposes to do penance for the faults his Brothers declare to him, considering himself guilty of them (rule 7), he is above all expressing his identification with Christ, who "without having sinned, became sin for us" (Rm 8,3). His intention is not primarily to imitate the penance of Christ, but if he takes on the attitude of a penitent which, according to his biographers, was remarkable, it is as a result of his religious experience, his identification with the redeeming Christ.

When De La Salle tells his Brothers to consider their work as a ministry, he is basing himself on his own interior experience: he considers himself to be taking the place of Our Lord for his Brothers. From the point of view of reconciliation in Christ, he has to assume responsibility for their salvation, he has to bear their sins. He takes the place of Christ as his "representative", as his "co-worker in the salvation of souls" (MR 196,2). His task is not "to act as if he were Christ", but rather to act with the awareness that through him Christ accomplishes his mystery of reconciliation. Christ acts in him. And so he says in Rule 6: "When my Brothers come to me for advice, I will ask Our Lord to give it to them". The same idea is reflected in MR 195: after reminding the Brothers that in their ministry to children, they "enlighten them in the person of Jesus Christ", he adds: "In order to acquit yourself of this duty with as much perfection and exactitude as God requires of you, give yourself often to the Spirit of Our Lord, so as to act only through him and for no personal considerations" (MR 195,2).

4. THE PROCESS OF IDENTIFICATION WITH CHRIST IN THE WRITINGS OF DE LA SALLE

Although references to this process can be found throughout his works, it cannot be said that De La Salle wrote a treatise on the process of identification with Christ. What we have, however, makes it easy to understand the process of interiorisation which De La Salle considered to be an essential characteristic of the following of Christ and the participation in his mystery. We shall now examine what De La Salle understood by christocentricity.¹³

4.1. "Disciple and imitator of Jesus Christ"

4.1.1. CONVERSION A CONDITION

"We call Christians all those who belong to that religion. This name comes from Christ, and it signifies disciple and imitator of Jesus Christ" (CL 20, Preface = DA 0,0,5). The first step towards identification with Christ is to become his disciple, and by implication, his imitator. De La Salle, however, prefers to be

more explicit : he uses both terms to define a Christian. A disciple is recognised by the very fact of imitating Christ, because, if we consider him our Master, “we must try to conform our life to his and to what he has taught us in his Holy Gospel” (CL 22,191 = DC 42,13,11). It is not surprising, therefore, that De La Salle insists so much on the need to imitate Christ, considering it as a constant activity in the life of a Christian. He offers various motives for this. Jesus Christ wished to be our model : “If Jesus Christ has performed these divine mysteries” it was “not only to redeem us, but also to instruct us and to lead us by his example to the practice of the most solid and sanctifying virtues” (CL 14,60 = EM 8,180).

As disciples, we must try to resemble him. De La Salle expresses this in the form of a prayer : “Lord, make me live in such a way that there is some resemblance between my life and yours by imitating your holy virtues” CL 14,66 = EM 8,193,8). This is an indispensable condition for sharing the glory that is Jesus Christ’s and which he has promised us : “I am convinced of this truth, that if I wish to share in your glory in heaven, I have to make myself conformable to you on earth” (CL 14,81 = EM 9,225,4).

But the Christian educator, the Brother, has also another motive : he is the representative of Christ for his disciples : “And since you are taking his place, consider yourself obliged to do the same thing” (MR 196,1). There are a number of consequences that flow from this absolute necessity to imitate Jesus Christ and to learn from him. One of them, since we cannot imitate someone we do not know, is that we have to have recourse to the principal source of this knowledge, the *New Testament*. The Founder insists on the regular reading of especially the Gospels (cf. MR 196; MF 190,1).

4.1.2. A RADICAL CHOICE

What De La Salle is actually proposing, although in different terms, by his repeated invitation to read the Gospels in order to know Christ and imitate him, is to enter into a process of “evangelical radicality” or, in other words, to undertake a tireless search for the roots of Christian life, or make conversion to Christ a dimension of one’s life. And this applies to everyone, whether he is a consecrated person, such as the Brother, or an ordinary Christian, such as his disciples, since all are Christians. De La Salle speaks often

of this desire for radicality and of not being satisfied with the level one has reached : “Attach yourself to what is of faith [in mental prayer] and leads [...] to the imitation of Jesus Christ and to the exercise of the virtues he practised, trying to imitate him as perfectly as possible” (CL 15,129 = R 14,3,3). “Have you renounced all things from the bottom of your heart ?” (MF 167,1). He says the same regarding the pupils : “You must encourage them, as Jesus Christ teaches, not to be satisfied with doing good actions” (MR 202,2). “That in all things they grow in Jesus Christ” (MR 205,3).

4.1.3. A CRUCIFYING CHOICE

The imitation of Jesus Christ is a human activity that is eminently ascetic : it calls for will power and constant effort : “I am resolved to follow you, O my loving Saviour, whatever it may cost me” (CL 14,64 = EM 8,192,5). Far from hiding the element of mortification involved in the following of Christ, he stresses its necessity, but this has nothing to do with the desire for perfection: it is a consequence of following Christ.

- Seeking God’s glory : “Being prepared [...] to sacrifice all honour, health and life for the glory and interests of God, imitating Jesus Christ, who said : ‘Whoever wishes to follow me, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me’ ” (CL 15,155 = R 15,1,2 quoting Mt 16,24).
- For love of him : “Suffer all trials of mind and body for the love of God and to imitate Jesus Christ” (CL 15,180 = R 15,11,1).
- Because “devotion to Our Lord Jesus Christ [consists in] imitating the virtues which he practised” (CL 22,188 = DC 42,13,4).
- So that we can enjoy his glory : “Imitate the crucified life of Our Lord Jesus Christ so that our body and our soul can enjoy the glory prepared for them in heaven” (CL 22,176 = DC 42,10,6).

4.1.4. A PERSONALISING CHOICE

De La Salle does not consider the imitation of Christ as an end in itself, nor as something mechanical or an exercise in willpower directed at a model who remains outside of ourselves. On the contrary, he insists on its personalising character and that we are following someone and not something. This is so much so that we can rely on the model to help us to imitate him. This help is interior, in the form of grace, since it is the model himself who inspires and helps us to imitate him.

We have already seen that De La Salle is reluctant to use the term “model” in reference to Christ, because perhaps he wishes to avoid the passive connotation of the word. He prefers to speak of the “example” of Christ, stressing in this way the positive character of the invitation of the “Master” and “Saviour” who goes before us so that we can follow him: “Jesus Christ has taught us the practice of the virtues by his example and by his words as things necessary for salvation. That is why he says he is the Way” (CL 14,94 = EM 11,249).

Aware of the dependence we have on the Master, De La Salle invites us to ask for the grace of imitation so that we can follow Christ better: “Give me the grace that you have earned for me [...] to imitate you [...] the grace to follow you and walk in your footsteps” (CL 14,64 = EM 8,192,7).

4.1.5. FOR APOSTOLIC MOTIVES

Where imitation can be seen most clearly as a manifestation of the following of Jesus Christ is in the context of its primary purpose, the mission. We are called to imitate Christ in order to participate in the mission entrusted to him by his Father. It should be noted that De La Salle does not attribute this purpose only to the Brothers, but to all Christians, saying in his catechism that among “the virtues that we must particularly imitate in Jesus Christ” there is “the zeal that he always showed for the salvation of souls” (CL 22,192 = DC 42,13,12).

We must accomplish the saving mission in which we are participating in the same way as Jesus Christ, that is, by being faithful to the will of the Father. For this purpose, we must renounce our own will “because Jesus Christ renounced his own will at the moment of his conception, even though it was very holy and incapable of disorder. For this reason he said: ‘I have not come to do my will’ ” (CL 15,114 = R 13,13,1 quoting Hb 10,7).

The invitation to follow Christ is even more pressing in the case of the Brother-teachers: “Attach yourself to Jesus Christ alone; occupy yourself with his doctrine and with the holy truths he has taught us, since he has chosen you in preference to many others to announce these truths to your pupils, who are his beloved ones” (MF 167,2).

Imitation motivated by the ministry applies to all aspects of the mission, and that is why the Brothers —

Christian educators — must, like the Apostles “model their conduct in everything on Jesus Christ and be with him at all the conversions he brought about. [...] This is also what you must do, since Jesus Christ has chosen you among so many others to be his cooperators in the salvation of souls. You must study in the Gospel how Jesus led his disciples to practise the truths of the Gospel” (MR 196,2).

The text we have quoted, and the whole of MF 196, helps us to further our understanding of the imitation of Jesus Christ in the context of following and identifying with Christ: we imitate the person who chose us and made us his cooperators. By imitating him we do not simply evoke a memory: we continue his action, we bring him into the present where he continues to save people, so much so that he “wants your disciples to look upon you as they look upon him” (MR 195,2). He alone can give life to what we do: “All your care for the children entrusted to you would be useless if Jesus Christ himself did not give the power, the quality and the energy that is needed to render your care useful” (MR 195,3).

The imitation of Christ ensures that prayer is authentic and, at the same time, is a fruit of that prayer. This is yet another point De La Salle insists on: he wants there to be a clear link between prayer and life, between prayer and the ministry of the Brother. It is significant that he says: “Do not look for feelings in prayer”, but value whatever leads to the “imitation of Christ and the exercise of the virtues he practised” (CL 15,129 = R 14,3,3). And when we are praying about a particular mystery — in mental prayer — and have assimilated fully its spirit, “it is necessary to join to this reverence for the mystery the interior desire to benefit from it and to receive the spirit, the grace and the fruit that Our Lord wants us to derive from it” (CL 14,60 = EM 7,179).

4.2. In conformity with his views and motives

4.2.1. INSPIRATION WHICH MOTIVATES

In the introduction to the *Rules of Propriety and Christian Politeness*, De La Salle speaks of the need for the motivation of all human conduct, including social courtesy, to be inspired by Jesus Christ. He bases himself on the words of St Paul: “Never say or do anything except in the name of the Lord Jesus” (CL 19,11 = RB 0,0,3 quoting Col 3,17).

De La Salle adds that it is for this reason that, when

parents educate their children, they should give them motives such as “the glory of God and salvation”, “through respect for the presence of God” or because their neighbours are “living members of Jesus Christ and living temples animated by the Holy Spirit”. These “views” and “motives”, in addition to “sanctifying all their actions”, enable them to distinguish correctly between “Christian politeness and affability and what is worldly and almost pagan”. Inspired by Christian sentiments “they will be able to live as true Christians, their external behaviour conformable to that of Jesus Christ and to that of their profession” (CL 19,11f = RB 0,0,5f).

He says the same to the teachers: “In carrying out your service to children, you will not fulfil your ministry adequately if you conform only to the external actions of Jesus Christ. [...] You must also adopt his views and motives as your own” (MR 196,3).

This desire to become truly interior and to conform to the views of Jesus Christ is expressed even more strongly in EM, where it is sought as a grace from God. Many of the “acts” of the *Method* express this desire. The act of union with Our Lord (meditating on the virtue of humility) reads as follows: “May the unction of your holy grace teach me to be humble of heart and to practise humility, not only exteriorly, as do people of the world out of shrewdness, but with a view of faith, in union with your Spirit, in conformity with your dispositions, and in imitation of you” (CL 14,105 = EM 14,285,2).

4.2.2. IMITATING CHRIST IN HIS VIRTUES

There is an even deeper level than interior conformity to Jesus Christ shown by external conduct: participation “in the spirit of the mysteries” (CL 14,59f = EM 7,178f). The following of Christ can be seen as a constant movement from the spirit of the mysteries to attitudes which result from it, to external acts, and back to the spirit that should inspire them (cf. RB, introduction).

In the *Duties of a Christian*, the consideration of the various mysteries of Jesus Christ leads to the imitation of the virtues exemplified in them. And so, “to honour the mystery of the Passion of Our lord Jesus Christ”, we must “imitate the humility, obedience, patience, charity and gentleness that Our Lord revealed during his passion” (CL 22,169 = DC 42,8,14). In EM, mental prayer on a virtue of Jesus Christ makes

us enter into the spirit that inspired him and unites us to him. This spirit puts us in contact with the unique mystery of salvation which Jesus Christ accomplishes throughout history.¹⁴ Once we have assimilated the spirit of the mystery, the normal development of our mental prayer should lead us to choose a practical application.

4.2.3. EVEN IN HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION

In De La Salle’s writings, interior conformity with Christ always leads to the paschal mystery. In this phase of interior conformity, De La Salle lays special stress on Christ suffering on the cross, and it is clear that it is in this that we can be most like him: “We are Christian only insofar as we resemble our divine Saviour, and it is the love of suffering and mortification that renders us like him” (MF 176,3).

Moreover, according to the meditation for the Transfiguration, conformity to the suffering Christ is necessary if the Father is to recognise us as having entered into the mystery of Jesus, his “well-beloved Son” (Mt 17,5). When a soul “is thus transfigured with Jesus it must take pleasure in speaking of his passion and cross. In this way, it will show that its whole desire is to conform with him in his state of suffering, for the Eternal Father will recognise it as his well-beloved only insofar as it has a love of suffering” (MF 152,3).

The attitudes or “virtues” which are most difficult from a human point of view reveal their true meaning when considered in the light of the spirit of the mystery of the cross revealed in Jesus. This is the case of obedience to which De La Salle devotes considerable space. For him, to obey means to conform ourselves to Jesus Christ, and to make part of ourselves the love Christ had for his Father, the same love which made him sacrifice himself to make up for our sins (cf. CL 15,169 = R 15,6,3).

In De La Salle’s writings, there are abundant references to mortification, penance and participation in the sufferings of Christ. His point of view, which appears pessimistic, becomes understandable when seen in the light of the process of which it is part, namely, the transformation of the “old man” into the “new man”. It is a process of purification, of death in order to have new life. This is not masochism, but the search for the new life offered by the Risen Christ, the same Christ who died on the cross.

It is a process which encourages the renunciation of sin in order "to live for holiness" (MD 28,2). The motive is Jesus Christ, and not our own sanctification. "We who have been born in sin and have lived in a sinful state, should conform ourselves to Jesus Christ in this life and suffer with him if we wish to have him as our Head and to be his members. We should also destroy sin in ourselves" (MF 125,1).

In this process, suffering is positive in character; it is a condition of life, a means of uniting ourselves with the redeeming mystery of Christ. "All that remains now, as St Paul says, is 'to complete what is lacking in the Passion of Christ, that is, the application that must be made of his merits to ourselves through our participation in his sufferings'" (MD 25,3 quoting Col 1,24).

The stress in this process is not so much on the personal desire for advancement, however essential, but on the contemplation of Jesus in his state of humiliation (cf. MF 112,2), the grace that he has earned for us. In the meditation for Holy Saturday, "On the Five Wounds of Jesus Christ", De La Salle invites us to "place your hand [...] in the wound of the side [...] to penetrate, if possible, right to the heart of Jesus, in order to draw from it into yours, sentiments of Christian patience, entire resignation and perfect conformity to the will of God" (MD 28,3).

We can say that the process leads us to conformity with the Saviour. The most representative image of the Saviour in all Christian spirituality is that of the crucified Christ. In order that God can send us as saviours, in order that the poor can recognise us as such (cf. MF 86,3), we must become conformable to the crucified Christ: "We should make our whole glory consist in bearing the scars of the Lord Jesus printed on our body. [...] We shall never better appear his servants, friends and imitators, than by imprinting his holy cross on ourselves, and by suffering like him" (MF 165,3).

The background to this whole process, and not just its final phase, is illuminated by the resurrection of Christ which, as De La Salle says, "is both glorious for him and advantageous for the faithful [...] because it is an assurance that we too shall rise again [...] because by his resurrection he conquered death" (MD 29,1). If Jesus Christ rose from the dead, it was "that we too might live".

However, what is required of us now is painful: "Crucify this body with all its passions and its im-

pulses on the cross of Jesus Christ". This pain is alleviated by Christ's promise to make us like himself in his resurrection. He can make our bodies participate even now "in the incorruptibility of Jesus Christ by being preserved from sin" (MD 29,2).

And so, in De La Salle's eyes, this process of "kenosis" in order to conform to Christ is a process of resurrection, full of hope and joy: "The resurrection of Christ should procure you also the advantage of rising from the dead spiritually, by making you live [...] an entirely new life. [...] Mortify your earthly bodies [...] and divest yourself of the old man and put on the new" (MD 29,3).

4.2.4. IN EVERYDAY LIFE,

A MINISTRY WHICH INVOLVES DYING TO SELF

The process of conforming ourselves to Christ, which we have just considered, runs the risk of being seen in terms of an abstract understanding of the Gospel, a sort of anachronistic transposition of the passion of Christ, if we separate it from the context in which De La Salle placed it, namely, the ministry of the Brother. It is in his ministry and by it that the Brother achieves interior conformity with Christ. The difficulties he experiences in his ministry help him "to die to himself" (MF 145,3), and thanks to the example and love of Christ he will overcome them: "Yet in all this we are conquerors, through him who has granted us his love, and who delivered himself up for our sake" (MF 152,1).

4.3. Living the mystery of Christ

4.3.1. A SPIRITUAL REALITY

In De La Salle's spiritual teaching, the imitation of Christ and identification with him lead us to a new aspect of following Christ: the living experience of the mystery of Christ. We can see here an echo of the words of St Paul, which were so dear to the French school of spirituality: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Ga 2,20). According to De La Salle, these words sum up perfectly the ideal which ought to guide our Christian life and our educational ministry.

When we first begin to follow Christ, and seem to be fully involved in the ascetic process of conversion, union with Christ is presented as an ideal for all Christians and not only for religious. In a book written for the pupils, his *Instructions and Prayers for Holy Mass*,

Confession and Communion, St John Baptist de La Salle has the following to say: "Change, then, Divine Jesus, this natural life of mine which seeks only its own comfort [...] so that living only with the life you have given me, I can truly say that I no longer live my own life, but that you live in me" (CL 17,272 = I 6,24,2).

In EM, De La Salle puts this union with Christ on a much higher level and, following Jn 17, compares it to the union of Christ with his Father: "You were in your Father and your Father was in you. [...] Make me dwell in you and may you dwell in me" (CL 14,56 = EM 6,169,a & f).

4.3.2. IN THE MINISTRY

When this mystical experience of Christian life is applied to the educational ministry of children there is no qualitative shift. When De La Salle uses terms such as "ministers of Jesus Christ" or "ambassadors and representatives of Jesus Christ" and applies them to the Brothers and, by extension, to Christian educators, he is speaking of the same reality which enables him to see the Brothers as "sacraments" for poor and abandoned children, who will be loved, served, taught and saved by Christ in the person of the Brother: "He wants your disciples to see him in you" (MR 195,2).

4.3.3. IN PRAYER

However, this "sacramentality" of the Brother is not automatic. On the one hand, it depends on the interior union the Brother has with Christ and which he can acquire through mental prayer: "You must, therefore, apply yourself assiduously to prayer in order to succeed in your ministry. [...] Jesus Christ, seeing that you regard him in your employment as the one who can do everything and yourself as an instrument that ought to be moved only by him, will not fail to grant you what you ask of him" (MR 196,1).

On the other hand, this sacramentality requires the Brother to identify himself with the purpose Christ has given his mission, and to have in his work "intentions as pure as those of Jesus Christ" (MR 196,3). Drawing a clear parallel between the Brothers and Christ, De La Salle tells them that, as ministers of Jesus Christ, their sole aim must be "the love and the glory of God" and "to procure the salvation of souls" (MR 201,2). Like the Son of God who came into this world, the Brother's aim must be to "destroy sin" (MR 202,1) and to communicate life to his pupils, so that he can say "what Jesus Christ said about the sheep

whose shepherd he is: [...] 'I have come that they may have life and may have it more abundantly'" (MR 201,3 quoting Jn 10,10).

4.3.4. AS PART OF THE CHURCH

The mystery of Christ is also the mystery of the Church, his Mystical Body. Sharing in the mystery of Christ leads invariably to sharing in the mystery of the Church. The ministry of the Brother comes simultaneously from "Jesus Christ and his Church" (MR 201,2). This is yet another motive "to have much zeal in your vocation". "You must also show the Church what love you have for her and give her proof of your zeal, since it is for the Church, the body of Christ, that you work" (MR 201,2).

In the spiritual teachings of De La Salle, the following of Christ has a strong ecclesial character which is reflected in the Brother's ministry. The Brother, as a sacrament of Christ in the Church, should act in such a way that his zeal gives "tangible proof that [he] loves those whom God has entrusted to him, just as Jesus Christ has loved his Church" (MR 201,2).

Sharing the zeal of the Church "for the sanctification of her children", the Brother helps "them to become truly part of the structure of this building" which is the Church (MR 201,2), "to build up with them the body of Jesus Christ and to make them holy and perfect" (MR 198,3).

De La Salle attaches great importance to this ecclesial dimension of the Brother's ministry, because, as he says, the Brother will have to render an account of his actions "as minister of God and dispenser of his mysteries for children [...] before the tribunal of Christ" at the Last Judgment (MR 205,1). De La Salle affirms the Brother's responsibility to build up the Church: "When Jesus Christ made you responsible for the instruction of children and their formation in piety, he entrusted you with the task of building up his body which is the Church, and as far as possible, of making her holy and purifying her by the word of life" (MR 205,3). The motive put forward by De La Salle reflects the identification of the mystery of Christ with that of the Church: "This is why he wants you to give him a faithful account when he calls for it, for he has this responsibility very much at heart, having loved his Church so much that he gave himself up for it" (MR 205,3). Finally he applies the mystery to the children from a christological and an ecclesiological point

of view. It is the responsibility of the Brother to introduce the children to this mystery. This is, in fact, the purpose of Christian initiation: "Jesus Christ desires also that you accomplish your task of making them holy so well that they reach the age of the perfect man and the fulness of Christ [...] and grow to the full maturity of Christ, who is their head, and through whom the whole body of the Church holds its structure and its union, so that they may be always so united with it and in it that [...] they will share in the promises of God in Jesus Christ" (MR 205,3).

St John's image of the vine and branches is used by De La Salle to express our union with Christ. We should note the ecclesial context in which he uses this Gospel allegory in EM. De La Salle comments on the "second manner of placing ourselves in the holy presence of God in the place where we are by considering Our Lord present in the midst of those who are gathered together in his name" (CL 14,9 = EM 2,24). In this community context, he refers to the fruit that this way of being present can produce, and he stresses the mystical power of prayer in life: "a continuous movement of our actions to Christ and of Christ's to us".¹⁵ "That all of our actions may be related to Jesus Christ and tend towards him as to their centre and draw all of their power from him, as the branches of the vine draw their sap from the vine" (CL 14,10f = EM 2,31f). Staying with the image of the vine, the second fruit introduces us into the mystery of communion between Jesus Christ and ourselves, the source of any fruit we produce: "Jesus Christ does everything in us because he lives in us and we live in him, and that has the result, he says, that we bear fruit in plenty" (CL 14,11 = EM 2,35).

In MR, De La Salle applies explicitly to the ministry of the Brother what was implicit in EM: the effectiveness of his work with children will depend on "the virtue, the power and the efficacy" that Jesus Christ gives him, since "all your care for the children entrusted to you will be true and effective to the extent that Jesus Christ blesses it and you remain united with him, like the branch of the vine" (MR 195,3).

4.3.5. A SACRIFICIAL PROCESS

Participation in the mystery of Christ reaches its highest point when we unite ourselves to his consecration to his Father. Following a tendency of the French school of spirituality, itself based on St Paul's letters, De La Salle returns often to the sacrificial as-

pect of Christ's redemption and the effect it should have on our lives. Basing himself on two scriptural texts (Ph 2,5f & Hb 9,15), De La Salle outlines the different phases of the sacrifice of Christ "who humiliated himself, taking the form of a servant, submitting himself to his creatures and being obedient to them until death on the cross; and who offering himself as a victim without stain, was exalted in glory" and has become "the mediator of the New Testament".¹⁶ We should note the positive character of the descending-ascending movement.

De La Salle indicates what response this requires from Christians and from the Brothers, because of their ministry. The basic disposition they should have can be found in the Eucharist: "Enter into the spirit of the sacrifice in which [Jesus] always lived, in which he died, and in which he wishes to remain till the end of time" (CL 22,192 = DC 42,13,13). He invites them to unite themselves with Christ in the Mass: "If Jesus Christ gives his divine life for us, we cannot do less than offer him our earthly and creaturely lives. This is the sacrifice we must offer if we wish to participate in that of Jesus Christ" (CL 15,220 = R 16,8,3). After the consecration, he suggests we intensify our efforts to be united to Christ and his dispositions as "the victim of adoration of his father, and as his mediator and reconciler with men" (CL 15,140 = R 14,6,8).

4.3.6. CONCLUSIONS

De La Salle asks the Brothers how their conduct reflects these dispositions in everyday life: "You offered yourself to God when you left the world. Can it be said you kept nothing back? [...] You ought not to rest content with having once given yourself to God. You should renew this donation every day and consecrate all your actions to God by doing them all for his sake" (MF 104,2).

In the meditation for the Vigil of the Ascension, De La Salle, basing himself on Jn 17, compares Christ's consecration to the Father with that of the Brother: Jesus consecrates himself for his disciples so that they can be sanctified in truth and can "contribute to the sanctification of others. It is for this reason he offers himself to his Father, and wishes to sacrifice himself by his death on the cross". In the same way, the Brother must sacrifice himself for his pupils: "Since you are expected to bring about the sanctification of your pupils, you ought yourself to possess holiness to an uncommon degree" (MD 39,2).

The union of our actions with those of Christ is what makes them holy and agreeable to God since they are thus included in the offering Christ made of himself to his Father. It is a gift and at the same time a requirement for everybody. De La Salle reminds the Brothers of this regarding their work with children: "Since you are obliged to help your disciples to save themselves, you must lead them to unite all their actions to those of Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Their actions are made holy by his merits and consecration, becoming through him pleasing to God and a means of their salvation" (MR 195,1).

Christ's offering of himself to the Father leads to the sacrifice of his own life. The Brother, as a "sacrament" of Christ in his ministry, must be aware of the consequences of his own consecration: "It must have been the ardent zeal you had to save the souls of those you had to instruct that led you to sacrifice yourself and spend your whole life giving them a Christian education and procuring for them a life of grace in this world and eternal life in the next" (MR 201,3).

And so, like the shepherd willing to give his life for his sheep, the Brother achieves union with Christ by exercising his ministry with one last disposition: by "acting with love, with a true and sincere zeal, accepting with much patience the difficulties [he] has to suffer, willing to be dishonoured by men and mistreated even to give [his] life for Jesus in the fulfilment of [his] ministry" (MR 201,1; Cf. MR 198,2; MF 135,2; 137,3).

4.4. Identification with Christ in the Spirit

The further we enter into the mystery of Christ, the stronger the interior force that draws us towards union with Christ. De La Salle draws our attention to this force which is none other than the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ His role in the following of Christ is so important, that De La Salle makes its successful outcome dependent on him, both for the Brothers and their pupils. However, the exercise of this power is restricted by our human freedom, our own desire to be converted to Christ and our openness to the Spirit's action.

De La Salle has much to say about the role of the Holy Spirit in the Brother's ministry and in Christian life in general. We shall restrict our own commentary, however, to the topic which concerns us specifically, and concentrate on aspects related to the process of identification with Christ.

4.4.1. THE SPIRIT, A GRATUITOUS GIFT

Whoever sets off to follow in the footsteps of Christ receives the Spirit of Jesus as a gift. The longer he pursues this process, the greater this gift becomes. When De La Salle speaks of the Holy Spirit as a gift of the Father given by the Son to the Church, he reflects the Christian tradition at its most pure (Jn 14,16; 20,22). De La Salle assures those who have left all to follow Christ that they will receive a hundred fold through the gift of the Spirit: "It is impossible to conceive how much Jesus loves those who have left all for his sake, and how he showers graces upon them both for themselves and for others. As their heart is empty of the things of this world, God fills it with his Holy Spirit" (MF 167,2).

By his constant reference to the role of the Holy Spirit in the development of spiritual life, De La Salle affirms the absolute primacy of God's initiative in the generation of the New Man. De La Salle often expresses this profound conviction, based on his personal experience, in the form of a prayer which he invites the Brothers to use: "Often repeat with the Church these holy words: 'Send your Holy Spirit to give us a new life, and you will renew the face of the earth'" (MD 42,3).

The gift of the Spirit is the first consequence of the presence of Jesus Christ in the midst of the Brothers: "He is in the midst of them in order to give them his Holy Spirit and to direct them by him in all of their actions and in all of their conduct" (CL 14,9= EM 2,26). This gift is also closely linked with the Eucharist and is its most immediate effect: "It is in order to give them his Spirit that he gives them his body in this most august sacrament" (MD 26,1). De La Salle returns to this topic in all the meditations for the octave of the feast of Corpus Christi: "Thus when we receive the body of Christ, we participate in Our Saviour's life [...] if we preserve the Spirit of Christ, which is what he leaves in us" (MD 48,3).

4.4.2. FUNDAMENTAL ROLE OF THE PRESENT IN THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST

The history of salvation, which is centred on the events of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, is continued and made present by the action of the Holy Spirit. In the EM, De La Salle mentions frequently the need to enter into "the spirit of the mysteries" of Jesus Christ. What this expression means is that the saving grace attached to the historical actions of Jesus

transcends those actions and reaches our lives today. Presiding over this process there is the divine Spirit who alone is capable of making us conform interiorly with the attitudes of Jesus, and of making his saving action present in us. Sometimes, De La Salle makes a clearer reference to the Holy Spirit, as when he says: "It is therefore most appropriate for us to unite ourselves with Jesus' birth, to come into contact with his Spirit and share in it: which gives us access to the Father as adopted children in his only Son" (CL 14,84 = EM 10,231 quoting Ga 4,5-6).

The intervention of the Spirit in our history makes life "according to Christ" possible, and this life is none other than the life of the Spirit. In his writings, at times, De La Salle moves from one aspect of this same reality to the other, to show that they are identical and to stress that the Spirit now has the leading role in the process of identification with Christ. For example in EM, basing himself on Ga 2,20, he moves from the life of Christ to the life of the Spirit: "Come, therefore, Holy Spirit, take possession of my heart, and animate all my actions to such an extent that it may be said that you produce them more than I. [...] Happy those who live and act only by the Spirit of God. It is of them we may say that they no longer live, but that it is Jesus Christ, or rather the Holy spirit, who lives in them" (CL 14,18f = EM 2,62).

In MD 48, the movement is in the opposite direction: this time the emphasis is on the presence of Jesus Christ in our soul through the action of the Spirit: "Do you allow him full liberty to communicate his Holy Spirit to your soul? Is he so alive in you that you are able to say that it is no longer you who live, but that it is Christ that lives in you?" (MD 48,1 quoting Ga 2,20).

4.4.3. EFFORT AND THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE SPIRIT

De La Salle is surprisingly successful in maintaining a balance between the role of human liberty and that of divine initiative in the process of the following of Christ. We know that De La Salle strongly encouraged ascetic effort, self-control and the desire of conversion, but at the same time, and even more strongly, if possible, he stressed the importance of being open to the action of God and to the acceptance of the gift of the Spirit, who is the moving force behind our journey to God and especially our apostolic activity. He is careful to avoid both voluntarism and quietism.

The meditation for Pentecost Tuesday shows these two opposite poles quite clearly. First, there is the call to make an effort of the will: "It is impossible to preserve the life of grace unless we mortify the inclinations of our corrupt nature: this is what St Paul calls the flesh. Hence, the greater resistance you offer the more you will be strengthened in the life of grace. This is the only way in which you may belong entirely to Jesus Christ" (MD 45,2).

However, despite this being "the only way", there is no doubt as to whose initiative it really is, and who the moving force is: "You must act [in your state] through grace and show that you are moved by the impulse of the Spirit of God. This is the mark, according to St Paul, that you are in the grace of God. As he says, if you live by the Spirit, act also by the Spirit" (MD 45,3 quoting Gal 5,25).

Elsewhere, the relationship between the two poles is expressed by the opposition of life and death: "It is this Holy Spirit who animates our actions, and who is in them a spirit of life and who acts in such a way that they are not dead actions in us" (CL 14,11 = EM 2,36).

However, even given this balance, human nature is very fragile, and De La Salle does not hesitate to insist on the absolute priority of the divine initiative. In a prayer before communion written for use by the pupils, he prays to Christ to give him his supreme gift to animate all his actions: "Come and take possession of my heart again and leave your Holy Spirit there as a token of your love, so that he can regulate all its movements, moderate all my passions, and leave in me only an inclination to do good" (CL 17,259 = I 6,13,2).

Our identification with Christ is accomplished "by the movement of the Spirit" (MD 3,2). This is equally true in the case of the pupils who also have to achieve identification with Christ, a process which depends on the efficacy of our ministry. Only the movement of the Spirit, if we have accepted him as a gift, will enable us to represent Jesus Christ. He alone will produce the required fruits in the pupils: "Frequently give yourself to the Spirit of Our Lord, to act only under his influence and not through any self-seeking. This Holy Spirit, then, will fill your students with himself, and they will be able to possess fully the Christian spirit" (MR 195,2).

By a process of cause and effect, De La Salle makes the success of the ministry to the pupils depend on the

action of the Spirit in the person of the minister, whose words become then “spirit and life for them [...] because they will be produced by the Spirit of God living” in you. In this way, there will be communicated to them “the spirit of Christianity [...] which is the Spirit of Jesus Christ himself” (MR 196,3).

It is not only the sacramentality of the minister which counts in this transmission of the Spirit. The sacramentality of the poor person is also a channel for the action of the Spirit: “Like St Francis, look upon

them as the image of Jesus Christ, and as being the best disposed to receive his Spirit abundantly”. From this “ministerial situation”, De La Salle draws a conclusion regarding the identification of the Brother with Christ: “In this way, the more you cherish them, the more you will belong to Jesus Christ” (MF 173,1). It can be seen, therefore, that the apostolic ministry is the place, par excellence, where identification with Christ takes place, under the action of the Spirit, both for the teacher and for the pupil.

¹ See the probable names of these writers in GALLEGO, *Vida...*, vol. 2, p.14f.

² Quoted by DEVILLE, *L'École française...*, p. 103.

³ *Idem*, p. 34.

⁴ *Pensées choisies*, quoted by CLÉMENT MARCEL, *Par le mouvement...*, p. 45-46.

⁵ *Catéchisme chrétien*, quoted *idem*, p. 169.

⁶ With a few changes, we use the outline suggested by CAMPOS, CL 45,336-340.

⁷ M. Campos warns against the reductionistic interpretation by the early biographers of De La Salle's evangelical life. Taking Blain as an example (and through him, Bernard and Maillefer), he shows how the Gospel, and therefore also the following of Christ, is reduced to “a summary of virtues, truths of faith, and conduct which govern the life of a Christian. [...] Secondly, he reduces the life of his hero to the heroic imitation of Gospel norms and practices” (CL 45,351; cf. 345f).

⁸ CL 45,143f.

⁹ CL 7,187; CL 6,54, § 28; CL 6,55, § 41-42.

¹⁰ CL 6,56, § 29; CL 6,57, § 43.

¹¹ Cf. CL 45, 339.

¹² For a more complete treatment of the *Rules I have imposed upon myself*, cf. CL 45,250-272.

¹³ We follow closely the study by SAUVAGE & CAMPOS in AEP, p. 189-217.

¹⁴ Cf. CAMPOS & SAUVAGE, *Encountering God*. p. 418.

¹⁵ See the commentary in *id.* p. 51-57.

¹⁶ MF 93,2. Cf. CAMPOS & SAUVAGE, *id.* p. 414-416.

¹⁷ It is often difficult to grasp what De La Salle meant exactly by such expressions as “spirit of Jesus Christ”, “spirit of Christianity”, “spirit of faith”, “spirit of God” and “Holy Spirit”. We invite the reader to consult a study by L. VARELA in *Biblia y Espiritualidad*, p. 182-190. Also recommended is the article by the same author on “Spirit of Christianity”, in *Lasallian Themes 1*.

As far as we are concerned, and to avoid confusion in the use of these expressions, we shall restrict ourselves to a number of texts in which one can presume that the references are to the Holy Spirit, the divine person, or in which one can identify him as the one infuses us with the life of Christ. Cf. CAMPOS & SAUVAGE, *Encountering God*. p. 46-54 & 416-418; MAYMI, *Vida de fe*, p. 82-89.