

# 80. IMITATION OF CHRIST

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## 80.B. A CONTINUAL INVERSION OF PERSPECTIVE IN FOLLOWING CHRIST

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### 1. AN ORIGINAL THOUGHT

De La Salle's teaching regarding the following of Christ does not differ from what has always been traditionally taught in the Church. For example, the four different levels in the process of identification with Christ (cf. 80.A.4) can be found in the writings of many Christian spiritual writers. It could hardly really be otherwise, and the fact that they are so clearly exemplified in De La Salle is a guarantee that the path

to Christ he proposes to us is a sure one. However, the method of following Christ proposed to us by De La Salle does have its own well-defined individuality, with characteristics that are significant without being exclusive.

This individuality, with the three characteristics given below, is expressed above all by its central idea.

### 1.1. Cultural influences

The cultural influence that marked De La Salle was not only that of the 17th century French school of spirituality : there were many other cultural influences, which provided him with the language to express his thoughts to us. It is this language which, for better or for worse, constitutes our first contact with him. His writings contain also a great wealth of biblical and patristic texts on which his culture was solidly founded. We find in them also various philosophical, anthropological and theological concepts which have been discarded as obsolete or have been relativised, or which no longer fit in with modern thinking. We have to recognise that culture, even theological culture, evolves, becomes enriched, and adapts to the new needs of mankind.

### 1.2. De La Salle's personal spiritual journey

We have already spoken of this when considering the following of Christ. The details of his life make his writings come alive, but in general, his reticence to speak about himself or his experiences makes it difficult to discover them.

### 1.3. His charisma

The gift of the Spirit, the special charisma which De La Salle received for the good of the Church, enabled him to discover new aspects of the mystery of

Christ, and to emphasise certain facets which others might not notice.

### 1.4. His central idea : the ministerial function of the educator of youth in the Church

There is a danger of the second and third elements we have mentioned becoming obscured and undervalued because of the first. It is, therefore, essential that we appreciate them at their true value, because they reveal to us a concrete way of following Christ in the Church. This is our heritage as Brothers and one which we share with other Christian members of the Lasallian Family.

The central idea on which these three elements confer a degree of individuality is the ministry of the Christian educator, considered from the point of view of the minister, and as it affects his pupils.

The mutual interaction of the elements we have mentioned gives rise to certain factors which we were able to identify when we described the process of following Christ, and which we would like to consider now in greater detail. These factors, hidden most often by their cultural form, provide us with a real challenge: they remind us that there is no neutral or standard way of following Christ, but that we have to do so through our own lives, using the gifts God has given us, and according to the ministry we exercise in the Church.

## 2. BECOMING A DISCIPLE : A CONTINUAL INVERSION OF PERSPECTIVE

### 2.1. Our need for conversion

Conversion, that is, the transformation of a person, the changing of his values and attitudes, his continual renewal inspired by the radicality of the Gospel, is inseparable from the following of Christ, for what is involved here is nothing less than the transformation of the "old man" into the "new man" created in the image of God.

There is always the danger, however, of reducing this process to the initial step, a sort of "gesture" of conversion, which excuses us from continuing along this road. De La Salle, aware of our natural tendency to stagnate, challenges us constantly to change our excessively human outlook and, making us dissatis-

fied with the level we have reached, urges us at the same time to take the next step.

This is very well illustrated by the challenge he addresses to the Brothers in the meditation for the feast of St Matthew, using as his point of departure the Apostle's reaction : "He rose up and followed him" (Mt 9,9). "Have you imitated the promptitude of St Matthew, who followed the divine invitation at the first word, without thinking of his affairs, and without asking time to consider the matter ? How often has Our Lord called you and how often, like St Augustine, have you answered : "Tomorrow, tomorrow I shall be converted" ? Do you not still say it every day ? Have you really left all from your innermost heart ?" (MF 167,1).

The following of Christ easily turns into self-deception when our everyday life is not centred on Christ, but on ourselves; when the values of the world take priority over those of the Gospel; when we seek our own will and our own glory instead of the will and glory of God. De La Salle often uses this confrontation of attitudes to make us put aside self-deception and make specific choices about our lives. Through a series of confrontations, a Christocentric process is set in motion, which brings with it, on the one hand, a liberating departure from our own egoism in order to undertake God's work; and on the other, the guarantee of our incarnation among young people, especially the poor, in whom this christocentricity becomes history and reality.

Let us try to identify some of the main inversions of perspective which lead to conversion to the Lasallian way of following Christ.

## 2.2. From personal effort to Christ's action in us

Far from being the result of human effort, the process of identification with Christ is the result of Christ's action within us. Our effort is indispensable, but it is Christ who gives it efficacy and value. This conviction is reflected in the following prayer: "Do in me what you wish me to do" (CL 14,56 = EM 6,169,2). It is Christ's merits, because of our union with him, which make our actions, even the holiest ones, pleasing to God (cf. CL 17,7 = I 1,2,6).

This shifting balance between our efforts and Christ's action is often vigorously referred to in De La Salle's writings. It is interesting to compare, for example, meditations 85, 22 and 45, in that order. The context of the first, for the vigil of Christmas, is the incarnation of Jesus Christ, who "has been knocking at the door of your heart and has been waiting to enter, and you have not wished to receive him. And why, if not because he comes to you poor, like a slave, a man of sorrows" (MF 85,1). The second, for Palm Sunday, has for theme the glorification of Jesus Christ, who has come "to establish his reign in souls" and asks us "to receive him fully by abandoning ourselves entirely to his direction" (MD 22,1 & 2). The third, for Pentecost Tuesday, speaks of the Holy Spirit who continues the action of Christ in us: "For when he [the Holy Spirit] comes into a soul it is for the purpose of giving it the life of grace, or of making it act through grace [...] grace which has been given you

and which Christ acquired with such pain" and which "the Holy Spirit with such goodness has communicated to you" (MD 45,1).

These three meditations highlight also the part played by human freedom in this balance: "If you would profit by the coming of Christ into your heart, you must make him master of your heart" (MF 85,2). "You must pay him the tribute of your actions [...] allowing him to reign over all your interior movements" (MD 22,1 & 2). "You have become free with the freedom of the children of God. [...] You must show that you are moved by the impulse of the Spirit of God" (MD 45,1 & 3).

The military connotations of some of De La Salle's language (normally borrowed from St Paul) underscore the dramatic character of the balance between our efforts and the action of Christ: "You must fight under his standard the enemies of your salvation. [...] He must be able to raise up an army composed of the virtues which should adorn your soul. [...] You must likewise combat valiantly [...] using the weapons he places in your hands" (MD 22,2). "The flesh with its desires fights against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh. [...] If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the flesh (that is, by the Spirit of God who dwells in you), you will live" (MD 45,2).

The final outcome of this shifting balance is union with Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit as the only acting agent in our life: "That is the reason why the Son of God came down on earth, and that is why he wishes to come into our heart, in order to make us sharers in his nature" (MF 85,3). "So that you can truly say: 'It is Christ that lives in me'" (MD 22,2). "This is the only way in which you may belong entirely to Jesus Christ" (MD 45,2).

## 2.3. From concern because of our sins to the contemplation of Christ Saviour

The shift from the first position to the second can be seen clearly in the EM. The series of acts that De La Salle suggests to beginners prevents too much concentration on oneself, and leads quite naturally to the mystery of Christ: Even in "the three acts which refer to ourselves", whose language is permeated with pessimism and contempt for human nature, our attention is directed towards our Saviour, his love, his merits, his example, and the forgiveness he offers.

We see this same shift in the *Meditations*. In spite of the apparent insistence on our sins, this often serves simply as a springboard to make us draw close to Christ, trusting firmly in his love: "We who have been born in sin and have lived in a sinful state, should conform ourselves to Jesus Christ [...] neither affliction, nor distress nor hunger [...] should be able to separate us from the love of Jesus Christ, [...] who loved us so much as to deliver himself up to death for love of us" (MF 152,1 quoting Ep 5,2).

#### **2.4. From penance in order to become perfect to union with the suffering Christ**

De La Salle's insistence on mortification, the refusal of comfort and the refusal to satisfy the senses, clearly reflects (in the way it was formulated) certain anthropological and theological positions which have now been abandoned. He does not propose this as a means to acquire the greatest possible perfection, but rather to make up in our own bodies "what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ" (Col 1,24). What is lacking in each one of us is "the acceptance of his will, the union of our sufferings with those of Jesus Christ, as members of his body, suffering with him and for him" (MR 195,1). Behind this language, however, which may sound outmoded to modern ears, we should realise that the "avidity" for mortification which we find in De La Salle's writings, was common, not only to the classical ascetics, but also to the great mystics such as St Teresa, St John of the Cross, St Francis of Assisi. It was for them a way of dying, not through a love of death, but in order to enter into Life, the life that Christ earned for us by his death. Our mortification becomes a testimony of Christ living in us: "Try [...] to let no day pass without mortifying yourself in some way [...] through a motive of religion and to give witness to the one you profess" (MF 176,3).

According to De La Salle, then, penance is not self-centred but Christ-centred. He does away with the classical distinction between the ascetic and the mystical: through the action of the Spirit, they become part of the same dynamic process that plunges us into the mystery of Christ: "I renounce, therefore, my spirit, in order to surrender and abandon myself completely to the guidance of your Spirit and of yourself, so that, acting only in you and for you, the penance I shall do may become yours, and that it may be you who perform it in me" (CL 17,216 = I 3,38,2).

#### **2.5. Renouncing the world in order to give oneself to Christ**

The world whose values are opposed to those of the Kingdom, the world which hates Christ and his followers (Jn 15,18), the world which rejects the word of Christ and those who preach it (Jn 17,14f) is another source of tension for the follower of Christ. This world, to all appearances, we have left; but the world we find most difficult to leave is within ourselves, the world which manifests itself in our nature and in our inclinations which run more or less counter to the Gospel. De La Salle often returns to this fact and insists on renunciation as a condition of conformity to Christ: "You who have left the world to follow Christ in a life of retreat, should make it your chief concern to give yourself entirely to him" (MD 59,1).

There is no compromise possible, the alternative is clear: "By associating with the world we become imbued with its spirit. But since this is opposed to the spirit of Christ and both cannot dwell together, if we become impregnated with that of the world, we shall necessarily lose that of Christ" (MF 182,1).

This break with the world is not something exclusive to the Brothers. On the contrary, they have to include it in the teaching they give their pupils: "It is necessary [...] that those who have been entrusted with them should take special care to instruct them according to the Christian spirit, which gives them the wisdom of God [...] which is totally opposed to the spirit and wisdom of this world and for which they must inspire them with great horror" (MR 194,2).

#### **2.6. Not my will but the Father's**

Take care "to be always ready to sacrifice all, honour, health and life, for the glory of God" (CL 15,155 = R 15,1,2). De La Salle accepts this radical flight from self which Christ proposes to those who wish to follow him ("Let them deny themselves" Mk 8,34f). The *Rules I have imposed upon myself* reflect his own self-renunciation in his search for the will and glory of God (cf. rules 2,5,8,9). When he proposes the same process to the Brothers, he is careful to do so in the context of identification with Christ, for it is Christ who fulfils in us the will of the Father, it is he who accomplishes God's work through us: "As Our Lord's chief object in coming on earth was the accomplishment of his Father's will [...] he wishes that you also,

who are his members and his vassals, and as such should be united with him, should have this same aim in your actions" (MD 22,1).

The meditations for the beginning of Holy Week, which introduce us to the central mystery of the Redemption, return constantly to the need to become involved in this work, with Christ and in Christ, in the way he did, by seeking and accepting the will of God: "In imitation of your divine Saviour, take care to desire only what God wishes, when he wishes and how he wishes" (MD 24,1). "Endeavour to become a disciple of Jesus in this respect by having no other will but that of God" (MD 24,3).

Without this purification of our own will, the fruit of our ministry would soon be corrupted: "Guard against any human attitude towards your pupils, and let not what you do be a source of pride. Both these things are capable of spoiling all the good that there is in the performance of your duties" (MR 196,3).

### **2.7. From the condition of a disciple of Jesus Christ to that of Apostle**

By this step, we stop being "private" Christians and become involved in the Church's ministry. We move from this comfortable Christianity, at the service of our own needs and personal perfection, to a missionary and witness-bearing type of Christianity, in order to carry out Jesus' plan, that is, the Kingdom of God. Like St Andrew, who "was already a preacher of truth while scarcely as yet a hearer of the divine word. Not content with assuring his own salvation, he sought out companions" (MF 78,2).

The experience of faith and of following Christ leads immediately to burning apostolic zeal and the desire that others know and follow Christ: "It is not enough to be true servants of Christ: you must also make him known and adored by the children you instruct" (MF 182,3).

### **2.8. From following Christ and, "as an extra", exercising the ministry, to following Christ by exercising the ministry**

This shift of perspective completes the previous one. What is involved here is not pursuing our following of Christ in order to make others follow him also, but rather making the following of Christ by oth-

ers the incentive for our own following: "This must be the object of all our striving towards perfection" (MF 182,3). We must "put on Christ" because we have to make our pupils do so. These pupils are the cause of our sanctification: "You are charged by God with the duty of clothing them with Jesus Christ and with giving them his spirit. Have you taken care, before undertaking such a holy ministry, to clothe yourselves with him so as to be able to communicate this grace to them" (MD 189,1; cf. MD 39,2).

### **2.9. From being a sign of Christ for the poor to looking upon the poor as signs of Christ for oneself**

Although De La Salle tells us that we have to be the "ministers of Jesus Christ", his "ambassadors" and "the dispensers of his mysteries for children" (MR 201,2 & 205,1), he does not let these titles go to our head. Instead, he draws our attention to those who are supposed to benefit from the exercise of these roles of which we are so proud, because it is in them that Christ makes himself visible: "Learn to recognise Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children whom you have to teach. Adore him in their person" (MF 96,3). This is a typical example of a shift of emphasis by De La Salle, revealing the three primary agents in our lives as Christians: ourselves, Jesus Christ, our pupils.

### **2.10. From belonging to Christ to serve the poor to serving the poor in order to identify oneself with Christ**

This shift of perspective makes us accept even more that our ministry is the cause of our sanctification. We have, of course, to be attached "to Jesus Christ, to his doctrine and to his holy maxims" since he has chosen us "to announce them to the children who are his well-beloved" (MF 167,2). But these children, these "images of Jesus Christ" whom we are "required to love" are those who bring us close to Christ: "The more you love them, the more you will belong to Jesus Christ" (MF 173,1).

The merging of these two perspectives is expressed particularly clearly in the meditation for Christmas Day. Conformity with the poor children is identical with conformity with the Saviour: we become "saviours for them" (MF 86,3).

### **2.11. From living the mystery of Christ to allowing Christ to manifest himself through us by the action of the Spirit**

There is a strong insistence in all De La Salle's christology that we should transcend the historical Christ and concentrate on the Christ living in us today through the action of the Spirit. This life is not the historical life of Christ, nor is it his historical actions that have to be reproduced in our own lives today: it is our own life, our ministry exercised with the atti-

tudes — the “spirit” — of Christ. It is not a life re-enacted today: it is the mystery of Christ which continues its existence in our lives and in our ministry.

The primary agent of this “movement” is the Spirit whom Christ “spreads in us. [...] It is this Holy Spirit who animates our actions, who is in them a spirit of life” (CL 14,11 = EM 2,36) and who through us spreads to our pupils “so that they can possess fully the spirit of Christianity” (MR 195,2).

## **3. “BEING A CHRISTIAN” AND “BEING A MINISTER OF JESUS CHRIST” AS ONE AND THE SAME PROCESS**

### **3.1. Each one according to the gifts he has received**

In the final analysis, there is only one motive for following Christ and becoming identified with him: we have received the gift of knowing the mystery of Christ, we have been chosen by the Father in the person of Christ, who has made us his messengers (cf. Ep 1,3-12; 3,3-12; MR 199,3). We follow Christ only in response to the grace we have received.

When De La Salle proposes this fundamental motive, he makes no distinctions: all Christians are called to follow and imitate Jesus Christ (cf. CL 20,iv = DA 0,0,5). It is worth noting the parallel he draws between what is required of the Brothers in order to acquire the spirit of faith (RC 2,1), and what he writes for all Christians in the preface to RB: “This spirit [of Jesus Christ] is the only one which should inspire all our actions [...] since we should live by the spirit of Jesus Christ, we should be guided also in all things by the same spirit” (CL 19,ii = RB 0,0,2).

Each person has to follow Christ according to the gifts he has received (cf. MF 189,1; MR 205,1). Among them, there is “an excellent gift from God”, which Christian educators have received, and which is to announce the Gospel to children. This is what motivates them to conform themselves totally to Christ “even to give your life for Jesus in the fulfilment of your ministry” (MR 201,1). Its goal for both teachers and pupils is the “utopia” of the follower of Christ: “that they think often of Jesus [...] that they speak frequently of Jesus, that they aspire only after Jesus and that they breathe only for Jesus” (MF 102,2).

### **3.2. The motivation of the minister of Jesus Christ**

When De La Salle explains the process of identification with Christ, it is as if he were speaking in terms of the two poles of a bar magnet.

One pole is the Brother as a Christian. The second is the Brother as “the minister of Jesus Christ”, “his representative”, the sacrament of Christ, from which there arises the need to become identified with Christ, or rather, to allow oneself to become united with him, because this, above all, is a gift he makes to us: “As you are obliged by your duty of state to instruct children, you ought to be thoroughly impregnated with the Christian spirit in order to be able to impart it to them” (MF 132,1; Cf. MR 195,3).

Both poles are present in the Brother: “Do you not bear in vain the name of Christian and Minister of Jesus Christ in the function you exercise?” (MF 93,3).

Between the two poles, De La Salle establishes a number of “force fields”:

1. The fact of being a Christian imposes the obligation of imitating Christ, in general terms, in his entire mystery. However, the ministry of the Brother emphasises specific “mysteries, virtues and maxims” of Jesus Christ, whose spirit he has to possess in a special manner.
2. Being a Christian implies, for a Brother, bearing witness to his faith (cf. MF 84,3), an obligation which applies also to his Christian pupils. However, by virtue of his ministry, he should be able to say like St Paul: “Join in imitating me, and observe those who

live according to the example you have in us" (Ph 3,16). Moreover, in doing so, he should imitate Jesus Christ who, after washing his disciples' feet, said to them: "For I have set you an example that you should do as I have done to you" (Jn 13,15). It is "the zeal for the salvation of the children under your guidance" which should lead Christian educators to practise what they preach, since children "ordinarily model themselves on the example of their teachers" (MR 202,3).

3. Like all Christians, the Brother should resemble his Saviour by carrying his cross, accepting the sufferings that life brings, for the love of God: "Do you like to suffer for God's sake in a similar manner? Remember that it is our pleasure in enduring something in conformity with Christ crucified and to please God, that shows most clearly our love of God" (MF 130,3; cf. 121,3; 165). "For we are Christian only in so far as we resemble our divine Saviour, and it is the love of suffering and mortification that renders us like him" (MF 176,3).

The ministry of the Brother emphasises in a special way this relationship with the Saviour suffering on the cross and the need to imitate him and become united with him so as to fulfil adequately the mission he has received (Cf. MR 201).

### 3.3. The Christian educator : a unified life

As the minister of Jesus Christ — the Brother, the Christian educator — walks in the footsteps of his Master, he quickly becomes aware that his commitment needs an historical and real context: he is not a Christian in abstract terms to which has been added the role of "minister of the Word": rather, he fulfils himself as a Christian in his own real life, as a minister and representative of Christ, through his mission to children and young people.

If we follow Jesus, we follow him specifically, participating in his plan of salvation in the ministerial field of Christian education. It is logical that, what is seen at first as imitating the model Jesus, should end by being lived interiorly, as a participation in the unique mystery which is the incarnate Christ.

In the light of this, we realise that the real motive De La Salle gives for beginning and pursuing this process of "approximation" to Christ is not the perfection of the Brother, nor his identity as a Christian, nor the

fact that he is a consecrated person. The real motive is "them", the young people for whom he represents Christ, for whom he is making present the mystery of salvation. The young people, to whom the Brother has been sent, make him discover what it really means to be a Christian and a consecrated person ("I sanctify myself for them..." Jn 17,19; cf. MD 39,2). Through them he sees himself becoming part of the history of salvation, acting as a free, faithful and creative "instrument" in the accomplishment of God's plan, in bringing about his Kingdom (Cf. MR 196,1). Through them and God's initiative, he finds himself introduced into the mystery of Christ, and he has no choice but to surrender all the fruit of his actions to the power and strength of Christ, or rather, to the Spirit of Christ who acts in him (cf. MR 195,3; CL 46,99).

De La Salle invites the Brother to understand more clearly what he is doing in his ministry: it is not teaching doctrine, however sublime it may be, but rather "procuring the Christian spirit for children [...] which is the spirit of Jesus Christ himself" (MR 196,3). He shows him that what he is doing is "giving life". And so, the words of the Brother become "spirit and life for them" (MR 196,1). But this does not come about simply from an external imitation of Jesus. He must make his "views and intentions" (MR 196,3) his own. He must allow himself "to be animated by his Spirit" (MR 196,1), even "surrendering himself to the Spirit of Jesus Christ [...] and acting only under his influence" (MR 195,2). In this way, to his surprise, the Brother finds he is taking the place of Jesus Christ for his pupils. This was De La Salle's experience too with regard to his Brothers (cf. CL 10,114f = EP 3,0,7), and he invites them to act accordingly: "Let them receive your teaching as if he [Jesus Christ] were giving it to them" (MR 195,2).

"The Spirit acts in you and by you through the power of Jesus Christ" (MR 195,2). The "work" that the Brother carries out and for which he has been chosen (MR 205,1) is nothing less than "the work of our redemption" which "it is up to each one of us to complete and accomplish" (MR 195,1). De La Salle places the Brother at the centre of the Christian mystery, in which his role as a Christian and his role as a "minister of Jesus Christ" become one and give deep unity to his life.

"In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's sufferings" (Col 1,24). De La Salle uses these words

of St Paul to summarise participation in the Christian mystery (MR 195,1), and the Brother hears them for himself only as an echo, because De La Salle applies them in the first place to his pupils: "You must lead them to unite all their actions to those of Jesus Christ Our Lord" (MR 195,1). And so, as the Brother exer-

cises his ministry, he can ascertain the authenticity of his Christian life, and perceive that there is no qualitative difference between what he should seek in his students, by virtue of his ministry, and what he should achieve in himself, by virtue of being a Christian and a disciple of Christ.

#### Complementary themes

Apostle  
Christian  
Church  
Conversion  
Counsels  
Disciples  
Faith (spirit of)

God  
God's role  
God's work  
Incarnation  
Ministry  
Mystery  
Prayer

Redemption  
Renewal  
Renunciation  
Salvation  
Spirit of Christianity  
Spirit of the world  
World

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