

86. PEACE

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1. Vocabulary

The language used by De La Salle as well as the language of the time made little distinction between “peace”, “repose”, “tranquillity” and “calm”. They were not synonymous, but certainly closely related. In the same way “peace of heart”, “peace of soul” and “peace of mind” meant more or less the same thing, although on occasion, they could be synonymous or even distinct in meaning. The word “peace” at times had the meaning of “silence”. In the 17th century, “Peace!” could mean “Be silent!” (cf. Molière). It is clear also that “peace” and “order” (regularity) were easily associated.

2. The social context of war and violence

De La Salle says nothing for or against the interminable wars of the kingdom of France of the time. Despite religious troubles, despite the 30 Years’ War and the War of the Spanish Succession, there is no explicit concern voiced in his writings about the return of peace to his country. Nevertheless, we find him full of praise for St Louis, King of France, because he obtained for his subjects “peace and quiet”. He notes also that he undertook the Crusades against the infidel in order to “destroy the empire of the devil

in their land, and erect on its ruins the Kingdom of Jesus Christ” (MF 160,3). The fate of King James II, a contemporary of his, who had to flee from England because of religious persecution, did not inspire any written comments on his part, and is not mentioned in any of his writings.

His journeys to the South of France, where the Camisards were in revolt, did not inspire him to write anything about religious wars, nor did the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, a contemporary event, nor the fact he worked for the conversion of the Huguenots, members of the “Supposedly Reformed Religion”, whom he met on his travels. Where heretics are mentioned in the *Meditations*, it is more to warn the Brothers not to have any dealings with them¹ than to urge them to be pastorally even-handed in their regard — not a wide-spread practice in his days.

The very rare allusions to war that are found in his writings do not show a concern for social peace, but are rather of the type: “Sometimes special prayers are said in the Church [...] in times of war to ask God for peace” (CL 22,6 = DC 10,1,3), or in a reference to someone he knows: “Another priest. [...] He was suspended for having gone off to war” (LA 31,14). There is very little written in this connection.

Even the difficult relations with the Jansenists are not treated from an aggressively hostile point of view, and do not really disturb the peace De La Salle sought. It has to be said, however, that he reacted vigorously to all attempts to make him appear as a supporter of the doctrine which Rome had condemned.

Nor is the violence that De La Salle had to suffer from the writing masters, or from certain authorities lacking in understanding, reflected in his writings in the form of acrimony or references to conspiring forces. The only violence he advocates is the violence to be used against the passions opposed to salvation. As he said: "One cannot be virtuous without doing oneself violence" (LA 11,5).

The peace he seeks most of all is that of the soul with God, brought about by war against sin.² It is also peace among people, peace with one's neighbour in the spirit of the Gospel.

3. Peace of soul in trials

The text in which De La Salle seems to bring together his ideas on peace is that of the meditation for Easter Tuesday. He entitles it: "On interior peace and the means to preserve it". Incidentally, the title is typical of De La Salle: whenever he states principles he almost always associates means with them.

The main point the text makes is that "interior peace proceeds from charity". Peace must exist in our relationship with God and because of it. This conviction on the part of De La Salle is based on the words of St Paul: "What will separate us from the love of Christ?" (RM 8,35). In fact, he goes on to say, that only what can make us lose charity and the love of God is capable of destroying peace of soul. Listing the various problems of life — "interior or exterior trials, [...] privation of anything to which we are attached, poor food, humiliating clothes, the danger of losing health or one's life, insults, calumnies, reprimands" — he concludes: "None of these things can make you lose your interior peace if it is a true peace, because none of them can cause you to lose charity" (MD 31,2). He adds: "Among all the misfortunes that may overtake you, you ought always to remain victorious because of the One who has loved you, Jesus Christ. For neither death nor life, nor any creature can ever separate you from the charity of God, which unites you to Jesus Christ, Our Lord" (MD 31,3 quoting Rm 8,35). Persecutions, then, cannot make us lose peace,

because "we must, indeed, expect to be ill-treated in this world after having worked all our life for God, and this will enable us to find and possess him, as also that holy peace within us" (MF 95,3).

From this point of view, De La Salle can say that, to have peace, it is necessary to become "more fixedly [...] and more truly attached to God", otherwise the soul can easily lose peace, if it is only apparent. But when a person lives the new life of one risen with Christ, then "the soul feels peace within it" (MD 31,1). When it remains subject to the movement of the Holy Spirit, it can be certain of "enjoying always true peace and tranquillity of heart" (CL 17,213 = I 3,36,2).

4. Peace of soul in prayer

As a great expert on prayer, both in his own life and in his teaching, De La Salle did not restrict himself to advocating vocal prayer, however important it may be:³ he invited especially souls greatly attached to God to practise prayer of the heart.⁴ This type of prayer, however, when it is badly understood, can lead to all kinds of excesses which some of its adepts in the reign of Louis XIV were unable to avoid. There was Molinos and his followers, one of whom was the famous Jeanne Guyon with her "A short and easy way to make mental prayer", as well as Quietism.⁵ Without going into any details here, we can note the book by Fr André Rayez which concludes there was no trace of Quietism in De La Salle, either in his life or in his works.⁶ If De La Salle recommends prayer of the heart, if he recommends repose and great peace in prayer, he does so while remaining thoroughly orthodox.⁷

5. Peace and personal discernment

Personal discernment requires serenity, honesty in judging one's behaviour, a spirit of renewal, an attachment to the Rule and the laying aside of anxiety born of human ambition. In other words, what is needed is a view of faith and a trusting self-abandonment to the divine will. One must preserve peace in the midst of the uncertainties of one's vocation and discern the will of God: "It seems to me [...] that you ought not to spend so much time on thoughts that come into your head about your vocation" (LA 10,1). If interior peace is disturbed by worries, one must discern the reasons for this with one's Director (LA 33,4) or simply calm one's agitation: "You allow yourself to get too upset and that does you a lot of harm" (LA

43,11). He is happy when his Brothers enjoy peace : "I am very happy you have great peace of mind" (LI 53,1).

De La Salle himself is able to preserve his peace of mind in spite of upsets and offensive words : "Your letters [...] have sometimes been [...] very offensive. [...] I have tried, however, not to take offence" (LA 48,6-7). De La Salle shows that he preserves peace of mind in his relations with others by his attention to small details. He is embarrassed for leaving without saying goodbye to a Brother (after sending for him several times !) (LC 75,6).

De La Salle also seeks to maintain peace in communities by discernment, in which a major part is played by respect for other people's words, gestures and ideas. What he considers to be most important is seeing Jesus present in one's fellow Brothers. "They will not give to any of their Brothers any sign of particular affection through respect for Our Lord living in them" (RC 13,1). During recreation, the Brothers will use their discernment not to disturb the peaceful atmosphere by making fun of others, backbiting and indulging in pointless arguments (RC 6).

6. Peace and community discernment

In the days of De La Salle, there were few structures that could help the Brothers in their community discernment. There were, however, certain exercises which needed to be made with peace of mind and serenity, and which were of a nature also to produce peace of mind. For example, the so-called "advertisement of defects", when done properly, had this effect. Spiritual conferences, which subsequently were discussed during recreation, were in their way an attempt to achieve peace in community through a sort of examination of conscience or sharing of faith. Even the interview with the Director contributed, and continues to do so, to community discernment, encouraging, as it does, peace and cooperation. Obedience supported by regularity, in its turn, helps to maintain "order, union, peace and tranquillity" (MD 7,2; cf. CL 15,159 = R 15,3,1). De La Salle sees obedience as "the fruit of charity and the pure love of God". It is not surprising, then, that those who obey "enjoy interior peace, consolation and joy which cannot be expressed" (MD 12,1). One could say that these were factors which helped.

7. God at the heart of fraternal peace

Peace should not be considered as a purely superficial aim, something like "peace in a cemetery", as the saying goes, but rather as a sign of our attachment to Jesus Christ and to his life in us : "There can be neither union nor peace where God does not reside" (MD 77,2).

One could say that what is affirmed here is the law of reciprocity. Where God is, there is peace : where there is peace, there is God. *Ubi caritas Deus ibi est*. De La Salle writes : "To be at peace with God we must be at peace with men" (CL 17,40 = I 1,6,53). We find another form of reciprocity in the fact that mutual support is a necessary condition for peace. As De La Salle points out in a commentary on a text from St Paul : "Bear the burden of one another's failings. [...] Each one has his burden, but ordinarily it is not the one who has it who feels its weight. Rather is it those with whom he lives who have to support it. If we wish to live in peace and harmony, we must mutually bear one another's burdens" (MF 91,2). It is mutual acceptance that maintains union — that precious jewel — in a community. We have mentioned a number of community structures which can help discernment to take place with peace of mind and with a view to peace and harmony. We should mention also the occasions when fraternal reconciliation occurs, an event which contributes so much to peace and charity.

8. Peace and fraternal reconciliation

For De La Salle, Maundy Thursday did not mean only the feast of the Eucharist : it was also the day of fraternal love and forgiveness. He found inspiration for the ceremony the Brothers followed in chapters 13-17 of St John's Gospel and, more specifically, in the washing of the feet. The exercise began with the reading of the chapters from St John. There followed a commentary by the Director in the form of a dialogue. Then all the Brothers asked one another's pardon for all the wrongs they may have done to one another during the course of the year.

9. Peace in the context of the liturgy

Peace is a notion that can be found also in the context of the liturgy. There is no need to dwell on prayers which mention or ask for the peace promised by Christ.

However, it might be useful to say a few words about what De La Salle and the liturgical experts of his day called the *instrument of peace*.

It consists of a pious representation, normally about the size of a hand. It could be made of ivory, silver or some other material, and vary in the degree to which it was embellished, carved, etc. Some very fine examples of these objects can be seen in museums such as, for example, the one at Monte Cassino. From the Middle Ages onward, kissing the instrument of peace replaced the kiss of peace given by the priest to the deacon and then exchanged by the faithful. A cleric would carry this instrument around the church, asking each member of the congregation to kiss it as a sign that he wished to share in the peace.⁸

10. Peace as a Messianic theme

Apart from speaking of peace on a personal or community level, a somewhat restricted field, De La Salle had also a much broader vision of peace: peace in a Messianic context.

He stressed the peace which Jesus Christ had brought us through the mystery of the incarnation and redemption: "Jesus tells us himself in the Gospel that he came into this world only to give us life and to give it to us with greater abundance. It is through him and with him, says St Paul, that all things have become reconciled with God. And by the blood he shed on the cross, peace has been given to what is in heaven and to what is on earth" (MF 112,3).

Although he never wrote a systematic treatise on peace, yet, through the various insights he gives in his writings, De La Salle enables us to understand what an important place the pursuit of peace occupies in the lives of Christians and religious. His commentary on the 7th Beatitude seems to summarise his thinking on the matter: "The peacemakers [...] are those who strive to overcome their passions in order to be and to remain at peace with God, with their neighbour and with themselves. They will be called children of God because of the resemblance they will have with him and with Jesus Christ, who always possessed peace and came to bring it to earth" (CL 20,192 = DA 216,2,15).

¹ "Although there may not be any heretics opposed to you at present because there are not any in the places where you teach" (MF 120,2). "By your mission you are required to labour, not against heretics, but against the evil inclinations of your pupils" (MF 161,2).

² "Peace of heart [...] is given only to those who have an extreme horror for sin" (CL 17,177 = I 3,2,2).

³ In his catechism, De La Salle asks the following question: "Who has made known to us the obligation that all people have to pray to God, to ask him for what they need?" He answers: "It was Our Lord Jesus Christ when he said in the Holy Gospel that God will not give us what we need unless we ask him; and that we would obtain all that we asked with faith in prayer" (CL 21,245 = DB 4,1,4).

⁴ De La Salle explains: "Man also has the advantage of being able to pray to God in his heart at all times and in all places" (CL 20,472 = DA 405,1,10). Further on, he speaks of a prayer of the heart "made through silence, by remaining in the presence of God simply with sentiments of respect and adoration, without saying anything or asking God for anything". He then refers to Cassian: "Apparently, this is the method of prayer Cassian refers to in his 9th conference, when he says that sometimes in prayer, the mind

hides from itself in profound silence" (CL 20,473 = DA 405,1,11). Cassian's actual words are: "Nonnunquam vero tanto silentio mens intra secretum profundae taciturnitatis absconditur" (see in the bibliography, Vol. 2, p. 63).

⁵ Our intention is to compare the idea of peace with peaceful repose in the prayer of simple attention advocated by De La Salle in his Method, and in the tradition of numerous spiritual writers down the ages. The Quietists, with their excesses went so far as to reject the prayer of petition, to maintain a passivity which required absolutely no effort on their part, a sort of lack of constraint whose negative effects they put down to God's will working in them. For a general history of Quietism, see POURRAT in the bibliography.

⁶ A. Rayez writes: "Despite the excesses of the Quietists which he knows about and condemns, De La Salle opens the door slightly to contemplation and to the passivity of the mind, using sometimes the vocabulary of the likes of Canfeld, Chrysostome de St Lô, Bernières, Durin, Courbon and Boudon" (see *Études lasalliennes*, 1952, pp. 53f and *La Spiritualité d'abandon chez SJBS* in the *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique*, N° 121, p. 28). Rayez goes on to say: "There is no sign of Quietism in the writings of the

saint. The Explanation and the Letters are completely orthodox" (idem, p. 32, note 69).

⁷ When recommending peace and repose in prayer, De La Salle does not hesitate, all the same, to reassure one of the persons he directs : "Your present state of prayer, as you describe it to me, is not the dangerous form of idleness you think. Provided you hold onto the thought of God and make progress towards him, why should you be upset. He has no need of all your efforts. Idleness is to be avoided, but at the same time you must not hamper yourself with a great number of acts in prayer. All you need and all God wants of you is that you remain in his presence" (LI 126,10). And the biographer Blain recalls that "in response to an admonishment made to him by an ecclesiastic", who maintained that certain things he had written came close to Quietism, De La Salle, who was "always on guard against any suspect doctrine", removed the following words

from the prayers said by the Brothers : "I vow to you, my God, that even if there were no other life to hope for after this one, I would not stop loving you" (CL 8,222).

We should note, however, that the same idea had already been voiced by St Francis de Sales : "Even if there were no hell to punish the rebels, or heaven to reward the good [...] the love of goodness would lead us to offer total obedience [...] even through a sweet loving violence" (*Treatise on the love of God*, I, 8, c. 2 to the end).

⁸ "The priest [...] kisses [...] an instrument of peace which the deacon offers him, then it is presented to all the members of the congregation individually with the words: Pax Vobis, Peace be with you" (CL 17,39 = I 1,6,52). In more recent times, the Church has gone back to its previous practice. In our own days, the sign of peace is adapted to the local culture, but the message it imparts remains always the same : "May the peace of Christ be with you".

Complementary themes

Conversation

Love - Charity

Union

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