

87. PIETY

Summary

1. The understanding of piety in 17th century France

1.1. Piety seen as a moral virtue that shows love and reverence for God and holy things. **1.2.** Christian spirituality has always seen piety as both a virtue and a gift of the Holy Spirit, associated often with the idea of devotion.

2. Piety, the teaching and example of De La Salle

De La Salle spoke of piety as **2.1.** an attitude of mind and heart in the practice of specific religious actions, **2.2.** the quality of a whole life totally given over to the worship and service of God, **2.3.** a number of practices known as “exercises of piety”, **2.4.** a certain kind of printed material: books, hymns, holy pictures. **2.5.** De La Salle himself manifested piety in his great respect for the presence of God, his practice of prayer and the other exercises of the religious life, his great reverence for the priesthood, and his complete dedication to the service of others.

1. PIETY IN 17th CENTURY FRANCE

1.1. The meaning of the word

The *Dictionnaire universel françois latin* (Trévoux, 1721) defines piety as a moral virtue which leads us to have a love and respect for God and holy things. The French word *dévoition* is given as a synonym. This is also true of Richelet’s dictionary (1680), but those of Furetière (1690) and of the *French Academy* (1694), following earlier usage, include as secondary meanings the ideas of filial love for one’s father and mother and patriotic devotion to one’s country.

1.2. Piety in Catholic spirituality

In the 16th century “piety” was understood as both a virtue and a gift of the Holy Spirit in accordance with the scholastic definition. The virtue was reverence for God, filial respect for country, for parents, and by extension, for all persons. This meaning had its ultimate roots in Latin writers, such as Cicero and Virgil, and in the early Church with such writers as Saints Cyprian and Augustine. The gift of the Holy

Spirit inspires worship of God as a loving Father and respect for all persons as images of God and belonging to God; it is similar to the idea of Christian love.

In the 17th Century the word “devotion” was often used interchangeably with “piety”. Towards the end of the century, however, the word “devotion” fell into some disfavor because of the exaggerated practices of the so-called *dévots*.

Nonetheless, De La Salle uses the word quite frequently (167 times as compared to 295 times that he uses the word piety), often as a synonym for piety, but about half of the time it has the restricted meaning of performing practices in honor of the Blessed Virgin, the saints, or mysteries of the life of Our Lord (which was a common use at the time).

During this period the word “piety” was also used to describe the quality of a person whose whole life was a fervent worship of God, including all acts of Christian virtue.

“Solid piety” was also identified with the practice of certain acts, or exercises, notably prayer, medita-

tion, self-denial, fasting, purity of life, vigilance, spiritual reading, etc. At the same time a danger was recognized in placing too much emphasis on external actions as ends rather than as means. Thus "solid piety" stressed the interior qualities of a disinterested love for God and God's kingdom.

The word piety was extended beyond the idea of

personal virtue to the whole field of activity for this disposition. Thus it became common to speak of practices or exercises of piety, manuals, works (writings), and letters of piety. In other words, piety was a literary genre. In art, the pious pictures became very popular. They came in many forms: engravings, water colours, paper cut-outs.

2. PIETY, THE TEACHING AND EXAMPLE OF DE LA SALLE

2.1. An interior attitude

In his *Duties of a Christian* (CL 20,167) De La Salle states that certain actions of piety can remit venial sins, when these actions are performed with the proper dispositions. The examples he gives include mortifications, depriving oneself of some pleasure for the love of God, giving alms, reciting some prayers, such as the *Our Father*, and certain psalms.

In his writings, De La Salle often refers to exercises and practices of piety, though this restricted, specific meaning represents less than 20% of his use of the word (53 instances out of a total of 295).

2.2. A quality of life

De La Salle also uses the word "piety" to express a broader meaning, that is, the quality of life that animates the whole person. Though there are often times when it is not completely clear whether De La Salle has in mind the restricted or the broader meaning, there are times when he clearly intends "piety" to describe the spirit of the whole life of a fervent Christian, including all acts of Christian virtue.

An example of his using the word "piety" in this broader sense, a quality that transforms a person's whole life, is in his catechism *On External and Public Worship*. The question, "How was the special piety of Saint Barnabas shown?" has this answer, "Everybody regarded him as a person full of goodness, and clearly guided by faith and the Holy Spirit" (CL 22,271 = DC 44,17,6).

Other examples are in De La Salle's observing that the piety of John the Baptist's parents "was not a sufficient model for what God was asking of him" (MF 138.2), and noting that the piety Saint Bruno "acquired in the ecclesiastical state" did not satisfy him (MF 174.2). In both instances the saints were called to seclusion from the world, extreme mortification, and

continual prayer in order to achieve the piety God expected of them. This may give some insight into what De La Salle understood as the conditions for achieving the ultimate of piety, at least for some persons.

A final example of De La Salle's use of piety to refer to a person's whole way of life may be in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*. He speaks of the reward a Brother will have when his former students conduct themselves wisely, "know their religion well, and possess piety" (MR 207,3 quoting Tt 2,12).

2.3. "Exercises of piety"

De La Salle speaks of piety as being one of the qualities necessary for a teacher, and as a characteristic of specific practices or "exercises": vocal and mental prayer, reading, signs of reverence. Pupils also must be trained in piety, as this is part of their education as Christians.

2.4. Pious books and holy pictures

There are a few occasions, especially in the *Conduct of Schools* (CL 24, passim), when De La Salle refers to pious books, maxims and hymns, and pictures which can inspire piety.

It should be noted that De La Salle does not speak of piety as an attribute of God or as a gift of the Holy Spirit, nor to describe love and respect for one's country or parents.

2.5. De La Salle's own practice of piety

In his biography of De La Salle, Canon Blain does not speak explicitly of the Founder's piety. However, this virtue is implied in the exposition of the saint's faith and charity, especially in the description of his great reverence for the priesthood (CL 8, 236f) and his practice of prayer and the presence of God (CL 8,270f).

The early biographers agree that De La Salle was inclined to religious practice from his youth. Both his father and grandfather trained him in the recitation of the divine office. Other examples of De La Salle's piety are seen in his choice of the priesthood as his

vocation even before he was eleven years old, his fidelity to this vocation after his parents' death, his care of his sisters and brothers as their legal guardian, his identifying with the work of the teachers, and his heroic dedication to the founding of the Institute.

Piety in today's world is best understood as the spirit of religion, or a desire for interior life, called the "Christian spirit" by De La Salle. As such, it is the fundamental aim of the Christian school. The word itself is unlikely to inspire students in many countries today: piety is not part of their vocabulary.

However, education in the spirit of faith, based on a knowledge of the Gospel, could inspire students with the kind of piety De La Salle was speaking about. He would say that this is a principal object of the spirit of zeal, which is acquired as a result of prayer, vigilance, instruction, and the good example of the teacher (RC 2,10).

Complementary themes

Charity - Love
Devotion
Education

Example
Exercises
Faith

Hymns
Prayer
Religious
Spirit of christianity

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