

97. UNION AMONG THE BROTHERS

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1. The source of union among the Brothers

Union in a Christian community is, above all, an evangelical virtue, and it is as such primarily that De La Salle wishes to practise it himself and to encourage his Brothers to practise it also. The example of the Good Samaritan leads him to write the following: "Our Lord gives us to understand what sort of charity we should have for our Brothers, and the nature of the union which should exist among us" (MD 65,1).¹ One text he refers to constantly is chapter 17 of St John's Gospel, in which Jesus prays to his Father, asking for union among his disciples.² Generally speaking, the Gospel is the Founder's principal source of inspiration when speaking of fraternal union, As he says: "Perhaps, [...] you have not seriously reflected upon the obligation under which you are of being closely united with your Brothers. Yet this is one of the chief virtues of your state, for, as Our Lord says in the Holy Gospel, you are all brothers" (MF 91,2 quoting Mt 23,8).

2. The Holy Trinity as a model of fraternal union

We can consider De La Salle's commentary on chapter 17 of St John's Gospel as the basis of his teaching on union among the Brothers: "This union should be so close and so firm as to resemble the union that exists between the three Divine Persons, not exactly, however, [...] but by participation. And this union of heart and mind, which Jesus desires to see among his apostles, should produce the same effect as the essential union between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, that is to say, they should all share the same sentiments, have the same will, the same affections, the same rules and the same practices" (MD 39,3).

The Holy Trinity is considered to be the model of the union that ought to exist among the Brothers. In the same way, the first Christian communities are offered to them as a model. We can see in them the spiritual motivation of their fraternal life. Without such

spiritual motivation, the search for union is perhaps illusory: "There can be neither union nor peace where God does not reside" (MD 77,2). One could say that these early Christian communities are a good example of an ideal community.

3. The example of the first Christian communities

De La Salle frequently recalls the fraternal life of the first disciples and the first Christian communities when encouraging his Brothers to live an evangelical life. He recommends them explicitly as models in his meditations: "You should remember that the members of a community should be animated with the same sentiments as the first Christians, who had but one heart and one soul" (MF 113,2 quoting Ac 4,32).

Even in the first version of the Rule, De La Salle writes: "In this Institute there will always be shown and preserved a true community spirit. All the exercises will be performed in common from morning till night. [...] They will all make recreation together, and also they will all go on walks together on holidays" (RC 3,1-3). Elsewhere, he reminds the Brothers: "The Brothers will possess nothing of their own, all will be in common in every house" (RC 17,1). What De La Salle proposes here is the life of the first Christians, in which everything was held in common. This is the "See how they love one another" which should bear witness to our commitment to Christ. De La Salle adds: "This is what St Paul recommends to the faithful in his Epistles, and this likewise is what was remarked in the Apostles and the first disciples of Our Lord, for St Luke records in the *Acts of the Apostles*, that they had one heart and one soul" (MD 39,3 quoting Ac 4,32).

4. The union between De La Salle and the Brothers

De La Salle was the first to commit himself totally to this fraternal life and to this demanding union. From the moment he brought the first teachers into his house and began to live with them, he established a true fraternal relationship, which was free of any oppressive hierarchical structure, and in which he shared on an equal footing. If he resigned his canonry it was in order to become like them. His biographer Blain puts the following words into the mouth of the Founder:

"I have no right to speak to them of perfection, as I did when referring to poverty, if I am not poor myself; nor of trust in Providence, if I have resources to ensure I do not become destitute" (CL 7,191).

The Brothers realised that their Founder was putting himself into the same position as themselves. Although the Brothers recognised the Founder as their superior, their attachment for him showed that they considered him as their true brother. It is easy to understand why all the attempts to replace De La Salle as superior met with great opposition from the Brothers. They were attached to him because he was a friend, as well as because he was their superior and an irreplaceable guide.

All the biographers always stressed the cordial relationship which existed between De La Salle and his Brothers. He tried to be pleasant even with the most unpleasant of his Brothers. He showed great solicitude for them by helping them in their difficulties, when they were sick, and when they were dying. He travelled great distances under difficult circumstances to be at their bedside. As Blain wrote: "He loved all his Brothers tenderly, and showed more affection to those who seemed the least pleasant" (CL 8,375).

The letters, more than anything else, reveal De La Salle's sympathetic concern for his little flock. They deal with the details of everyday life and the smallest needs of the Brothers: "I was quite upset to hear of your illness but am happy that God has brought you back to health" (LA 26,2). "I write as cordially as I can and write nothing but for your good" (LA 46,1). "We will have to get a pair of breeches made for you, if you need them. I will see that you are given what you need" (LA 49,10). "I am quite distressed to hear of the illness that you are suffering, my very dear Brother. We must try to find some way of remedying this" (LA 12,1). "Do, please, try to have an engaging manner, and make it one of your chief occupations to bring about union among your Brothers" (LI 71,7).

5. De La Salle's testament

On the two occasions when illness brought him close to death, De La Salle did not fail to recommend union in community to his Brothers, saying that it was one of the essential conditions of vitality and continued existence.

When he was seriously ill in 1690 and seemed to be close to death, he made a recommendation to the

Brothers gathered at his bedside, a recommendation, Blain tells us, "that his heart often placed on his lips": "I recommend to you great union and great obedience" (CL 7,306).

Likewise in April 1719, when he was at death's door, De La Salle drew up his testament in which, once again, he recommends his Brothers, with equal insistence, "to have an intimate union among themselves" (CL 8,173), and total submission to the Church.

6. Jesus Christ present in the midst of the Brothers

De La Salle's intentions were not simply pragmatic. He did not recommend union simply because it promoted stability in the community, but also because in some way it was the reason for Christ's presence in the midst of the Brothers. De La Salle was completely convinced that Christ was present in a community gathered together in his name. He speaks of this presence as a source of inspiration in mental prayer.

Jesus is also a living presence that animates community life: "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. He is in the midst of them to bring them together, accomplishing himself what he asked for them from his Father before his death, by these words in St John: 'May they be one in us, as you, Father, and I are one, that they may become perfectly one'. That is to say, so one and united, having only the same Spirit, which is the Spirit of God, that they may never become disunited" (CL 14,9 = EM 2,26-27).³

The following paragraph, in which De La Salle speaks of the unity of life centred on Jesus, is very rich and deserves to be reproduced in full as a choice example of De La Salle's writing. As this is not possible, we limit ourselves to quoting a passage in which De La Salle offers his Brothers a particularly striking image: "For Jesus Christ is in relation to them [the Brothers] like the sun which not only communicates to plants the power to produce, but also gives to their fruits the goodness and perfection, which are more or less great in proportion to their greater or lesser exposure to the sun's rays. It is in this way that the Brothers perform their exercises and the actions in keeping with their state, with more or less perfection in proportion to their greater or lesser contact, conformity and union with Jesus Christ" (CL 14,10 = EM 2,32).

Finally, De La Salle speaks of a particular fruit which results from the presence of Jesus in the midst of the Brothers, and this is a close union with Jesus Christ, who lives in us, and in whom we live. He suggests the following prayer: "Give me also the grace, through your presence in our midst, assembled in order to pray to you, to have an intimate union of mind and heart with my Brothers" (CL 14,11f = EM 2,37,2).

Naturally, De La Salle reminds the Brothers that their relations with one another should be based on the fact that Jesus is present in each one of them. As the Rule said: "The Brothers will have a cordial affection for one another, but they will not give anyone a sign or proof of special affection, through respect for Our Lord, whom they should honour equally in all, as being animated by him and living according to his spirit" (RC 13,1). "The respect they will have for God living in them" (their Brothers) will be a source of mutual esteem, and cause them to consider fellow Brothers superior to themselves (RC 13,6).

7. The practice of fraternal life

7.1. OBSTACLES TO UNION

In terms of everyday life, union which results from cohesion and mutual acceptance in community implies the need for a good deal of realism, something which is not lacking in De La Salle. He tells his Brothers that he knows from experience that "a community without charity and without union is hell" (MD 65,1). In this hell, nothing else is heard apart from complaints, murmuring and slander, all of which causes great trouble and disquietude. His diagnosis reveals great perspicacity: "The first reason why there is sometimes a lack of union in community is that some seek to be preferred to their companions, from a purely human consideration" (MF 91,2).

7.2. FACTORS PROMOTING UNION

Setting aside purely human views is, therefore, one of the possible ways of strengthening fraternal union. The first Rule prescribed attitudes which promoted union and did away with sources of friction.⁴ Union is strengthened also by positive attitudes. Brothers need to strive for it constantly and speak of it willingly, as a goal worth pursuing. Regularity (CL 15,159 = R 15,3,1) and obedience considered as a virtue which establish order and union⁵ (MD 7,2) are two powerful factors which promote union in community.

There are also other virtues whose presence helps to create union among Brothers. In particular, there is gentleness: "By it [gentleness] we succeed in preserving union with all our Brothers" (MD 65,2). Another important virtue is patience, which is shown by an unconditional acceptance of others: "The way to maintain union in a community, despite these diversities of character, is to suffer each other's defects in a charitable spirit, to be disposed to condone our Brothers' faults" (MD 74,1).⁶ De La Salle never hesitates to speak frankly about the conditions union imposes: "If, then, we have real charity towards our Brothers, it is not permissible to say 'I cannot suffer this from so-and-so', or, with regard to another, 'such a thing is not to be tolerated', or again, 'he must put up with my ill-humour, or with my weakness'. To speak thus would show that we did not endure everything from everybody" (MD 65,1).

What De La Salle says reminds M. Sauvage and M. Campos of Bonhoeffer's words in his *Community Life: to carry is to endure* (AEP 415).

8. The practice of fraternal forgiveness

The writings of De La Salle include The Ten Commandments of the Society in rhyming couplets (RC 16,18). The second couplet refers to fraternal union:

"You will love all your Brothers
cordially and always".

In addition to all the means to promote union already mentioned, which reveal a shrewd understanding of human psychology and sharp spiritual insight, De La Salle adds another, suggested to him by Christ's prayer, St Paul's teaching and by monastic practice: the exercise of mutual forgiveness.

M. Sauvage and M. Campos comment as follows on this practice: "During this exercise of pardon, the words of St Paul are quoted: 'Bear the burden of one another's failings, then you will be fulfilling the law of Christ'. The purpose of this is to recall that mutual support is not only passive. It implies openness towards others to help them in their pursuit of God. Its purpose is also to draw attention to the spirit in which this exercise should be performed: not to work off one's aggressiveness or to settle scores, but to offer active support to others and to assist them spiritually" (AEP 415 quoting Ga 6,2).

De La Salle also commented on the words of St Paul which inspired this exercise of pardon: "When he [God] placed you in community, he imposed on you a burden which is heavy to bear. And what is this burden if not the defects of your Brothers. Yet, no matter how heavy this may be, St Paul insists that we must bear it. He says: 'Bear the burden of one another's failings, then you will be fulfilling the law of Christ'. Have you grasped this lesson? Have you understood it perfectly? Then practise it. God himself gives you the example, for he has suffered untold outrages from you, and daily continues so to suffer. You have committed many sins against him, though you owe him gratitude for so many graces. Yet, if you have recourse to him, the heavenly Father will forgive you your trespasses, but only on condition that you forgive your fellow men theirs. You must bear no ill-will for the offences they have given you or may still give you" (MD 74,3 quoting Mt 6,14).

This commentary explains also why De La Salle considered another exercise to be an important external support of the community. This was the weekly exercise when Brothers told their fellow Brothers publicly of their faults. With this was associated the daily practice of accusing oneself in public of one's exterior faults against the Rule, and the weekly account of one's conscience to the Brother Director. All these practices were intended to help the Brothers "to preserve a great purity of heart" (CL 15,67 = R 10,2,21).

This purity of heart is strengthened in particular by not harbouring resentment when one is publicly told of one's faults, and by the correction of those faults.

Another means De La Salle prescribed in order to increase fraternal union was the annual exercise of pardon on Holy Thursday. One could say that De La Salle, already in his day, had the same insight (although expressed differently) as Jean Vanier, who saw community as "a place of pardon and celebration".

This exercise, already prescribed in the *Practice of the Daily Timetable*, was included in its original form in all the *Rules* from 1718 to 1967: "On Holy Thursday, immediately after dinner, chapters 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 of the Gospel of St John will be read publicly. Next, the Brother Director will speak about the union that the Brothers should have and should

preserve among themselves. His talk will last till 2 o'clock. At 2 o'clock, the Brothers will take turns to ask pardon of one another, beginning with the Brother Director, for the trouble they have caused their Brothers and the bad example they have given them" (CL 25,125f = RC 30,20,30).⁸

9. Union and prayer

Prayer is responsible to a great extent for the quality of the union that exists among the Brothers. "When we are assembled [...] for whatever [...] exercise it may be [...] we are in Our Lord's company. [...] He is in the midst of the Brothers [...] to bring them together [...] having only the same Spirit, which is the Spirit of God" (CL 14,9 = EM 2,25-27).⁹

De La Salle recalls the importance of promoting union by the power of prayer: "Union in community is truly a precious gem. [...] When this is lost, all is lost. Hence if you wish your community to continue, preserve this virtue carefully" (MF 91,2).

Not only must the Brothers make an effort to maintain it, but they must also ask God for it: "There is nothing you should pray for with greater insistence than union of heart and mind with your Brothers. [...] Ask, therefore, the Lord of all hearts to make yours one with those of your Brothers, in that of Jesus" (MD 39,3).

And so, in the prayers the Founder composed for the Brothers, and which continued to be recited in the Institute till the Office of the Church was adopted, the Brothers would say each day: "Give us, O my Saviour Jesus, the perfection you required of us in your holy Gospel, and that union which you asked the Eternal Father to grant us, before you died".¹⁰

10. Union and association

De La Salle uses the noun "union" or the verb "to unite" when speaking of commitment to the work of education: "I promise to unite myself [...] with the Brothers of the Christian Schools who are associated...". These words from the 1694 formula of vows recall those of the special vow made in 1691: "We make vows of association and union". The union spoken of here is that of attachment and membership in the pursuit of a common goal.

Union here means association. But this is not enough unless this association is inspired by a spirit, which consists in the pursuit of closer relations with others, governed by respect for the individual, in order to fulfil Jesus' law of love, and strive to bring about the unity he asked of his Father for his disciple

¹ De La Salle bases himself also on the teaching of St Paul.

² This text was read on Holy Thursday at a community meeting. The Director would comment on it in his talk to the Brothers on the union they should have. It was also part of the prescribed reading during the annual retreat. De La Salle wrote a meditation on this subject for the vigil of the Ascension (MD 39).

³ De La Salle points out the various effects of this presence and some of the reasons for it: "Jesus Christ is in the midst of the Brothers in their exercises, in order to give them the spirit of their state, [...] to teach them the truths and maxims of the Gospel, [...] in order to commit them to making the practice of the same maxims of the Gospel uniform in their society, in order that they may always maintain an entire and perfect union among them" (CL 14,9 = EM 2,28f).

⁴ The Brothers will not give anyone "any sign or proof of special affection, through respect for Our Lord whom they must honour equally in everyone" (RC 13,1). "They will show esteem for the Brothers, and the sincere, true and interior union they have with them" (RC 13,12).

⁵ The verb *est* (is) in the text of the 1731 edition, considered to be the first, has been corrected by hand to read *mest* or *met* (puts, establishes). De La Salle regularly used the expression *mettre ordre* (establish order).

⁶ De La Salle adds: "As soon as something occurs which you find hard to bear, you fail to show charity towards your Brother and union with him" (MD 74,2).

⁷ In a letter, the date and intended recipient of which are unknown, De La Salle, quoting from his own writings, a rare occurrence, refers to the 7th of these command-

ments: "You will mortify your mind and your senses frequently" (LC 94,3; cf. R 3,1).

8. Our reference is to the 1718 *Common Rules*, but the *Daily Timetable*, which is thought to date from as early as 1682, bears witness to the antiquity of the text. De La Salle provided a formula for the Brothers to use: "My very dear Brother, I humbly beg your pardon for all the trouble I have caused you, and for all the bad example I have given you since I have had the happiness of living with you in community, and I beg you to pardon me and ask God also to pardon me". The Director is asked to pardon disobedience towards him, rather than bad example.

This exercise served to put the past in order and mark the beginning of a period of renewed union.

9. "De La Salle's teaching on fraternal union is rooted in mystical realism: it is the Spirit of Jesus Christ who creates unity in a Christian community with its diversity of members, just as he is the personal link between the Father and the Son" (CAMPOS & SAUVAGE, CL 50,210. Cf. *Encountering...*, in bibliography).

10. Taken from morning prayer: "My God, I recognise myself unworthy..." Cf. *Manual of Piety* or, in the present volume, the article on *Prayer* (Insert).

Complementary themes

Association

Community

Goodness

Love-Charity

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