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REACHING THE UNREACHED... IN THE STEPS OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

Note: The Editorial Committee is grateful to the author for his response to an invitation to contribute a paper to 'Lasalliana'. Brother Superior General, in his Christmas Letter 1982, paid tribute to Brother James's work in these terms: "Not far from Madurai, Brother James Kimpton is engaged in an impressive work of development and training among very poor children and families (including a group of lepers) in the 'Saint Joseph Village' of Genguvarpatti. This type of work deserves our fullest admiration and our wholehearted support, inspired as it is by an authentic Lasallian spirit on behalf of people whose needs are extreme."

In my work among the poor remote villages of this part of South India, St. De La Salle and his special charisms have been the heart and soul of what I do. Without the very particular atmosphere that the whole Lasallian drive has given to my own individual outreach, I think little would have been achieved of any permanence.

THE UNKNOWN FUTURE — AS IT WAS FOR DE LA SALLE, AS IT IS FOR US

Quite definitely De La Salle's whole life was one of several displacements in which he had to take steps out into the dark of the unknown future. These steps, these displacements, he had to make in total trust in the call of divine Providence. He had to make them, not asking for light to see the whole road, but just enough to make the next few steps. He was called gradually to leave all aspects of his established life for which he had been specially prepared during his earlier years. Thus he gave up his position in the Cathedral of Rheims to go down and live with the much lower level of society his new work demanded. He had eventually to leave his aristocratic paternal house and family in order to live among the uncultured men whom God had chosen for him to work with. He went into work that was wholly new, started off in an apostolate which he could not possibly foresee. So much so that eventually, towards the end of his life, he admitted that if he had known the amount of suffering and hardship entailed in the work he had founded, he would not have touched it with the tip of his little finger.

Our work sometimes requires that we leave absolutely everything connected with the first part of our lives or even with subsequent parts of them, so that we are making new starts in unknown territories during different times of our lives. We may be asked to leave family and all established friends, home, and even country, permanently. We may have to abandon any connection with our own culture and accept another which is completely foreign. And we may have to step out into a way of life and work which is totally unknown.

Thus I, as an Englishman, have, at the choosing of Providence, spent most of my life in countries of the East, doing work I never dreamed I would do, and of such a wide variety that I too would have taken fright had it been presented to me in the beginning years: healing the sick, housing the homeless, teaching the untaught, caring for orphans, even mothering the tiny babies that are brought to us unwanted and uncared for, caring for leprosy patients... In all this, God's voice was heard and a step was made into the dark of the unknown future, taking the risk of launching out into the deeps pointed out by God.

TRUST IN PROVIDENCE WHICH DID NOT FAIL DE LA SALLE AND DOES NOT FAIL US

De La Salle taught me that his Brothers must have blind and total trust in divine Providence. He made it clear in his own life that God gives only so that we may give it all away, and that the more we give the more we will receive to give away, and that what is held on to can only stagnate and be fruitless.

Thus when De La Salle consulted his spiritual director to find out what he should do with all his inherited wealth he was quite bluntly told to give it all away and not keep even a fraction of it in any form. So-called wiser men thought he should use it to found his new schools, or that he should put it into the bank and live off the interest. But no, once again there was that step into the dark to be made, a challenge from God to be faced and a risk to be taken. And De La Salle took it. He literally gave everything away to the non-productive poor and went off and lived like them, completely dependent henceforth on Providence for all his needs and those of his earliest followers. Surely that too was meant as a lesson for us all; and so De La Salle made sure that his Brothers understood that their work was to be among the poorest and to be wholly gratuitous, and that they too were to depend on Providence — in the spirit of faith that he so often referred to.

In our work among the poorest of people in these villages, which are primitive and so lacking in every kind of security and necessity, our approach has always been, and I hope always will be, that if there is a need clearly shown to us by God, then the first step is not to look into purses or bank accounts, but to attend to the need, knowing full well with deep conviction that God will provide all that is needed in materials, finances and men. Never once has this failed. We came here with an allowance of Rs. 2,000 and we were asked not to request more hereafter. We looked around at our neighbours who lived in the most abject poverty and saw what we must do. We reached out. We attended to the greatest needs. We did the most foolish things in the eyes of the world and of those who depend upon large bank accounts or strong sources of income. We simply gave away what we had and we also started to build and heal and to care for children and the very needy, with no money. Our annual expenditure (not our budget, note, because only God can budget) is now Rs. 2,600,000 in the villages alone; and we also run a children's home for the most destitute and for unwanted babies, with its own separate accounting of close to Rs. 700,000.

Our Founder stepped out into the dark with empty hands and apparently inadequate helpers. But divine Providence never failed him. Divine Providence has never, in any way, failed us. Always there is enough to feed the five thousand in the desert — with twelve baskets of superabundance left over for still others.

THE SAINT'S ENDURING MESSAGE: TO RADIATE CHRIST TO OTHERS

But De La Salle knew full well that his real work was to be a redeemer with and for Christ. He knew that there was no other reason for his call from God than that he should spend himself in order to lead other souls to God, in order to be another redeemer in the work chosen for him by God. He knew also full well, and kept on reminding his Brothers, that the whole reason and meaning for their being Brothers was that they should radiate Christ to all with whom they came into contact the whole day long. They were to carry Christ in themselves because Christ in others awaited their love, and also their love was HIS love. There was to be this mutual interchange of Christs from the carrier to the receiver, as is always the case. De La Salle kept on insisting that we meet Christ in the early part of the day, at meditation and Mass and Communion, and that we keep in close touch with Him all day long, and that thus, indeed, we would be able to radiate Christ, that thus we would be other redeemers — and only thus. How frequently he came back to that refrain; how much he insisted that the Brothers be men of deep prayer — or else be worthless as pruned vine twigs.

In our work among the Hindus and Muslims in these small villages hidden away behind their veils of coconut palms, we rarely meet with Christians. And when I questioned myself why God had put us in such a place, among people we would not ever convert, He made it very, very clear that He was the one who was working and not us. He, Christ, was the one who would reach out to whomsoever He put in our paths each day. We know full well that only God can convert if He sees the need and when He is ready. He, Christ, would do His work, in His way — and often without our ever knowing what He was doing or why. Our responsibility was merely to keep in the closest touch with Christ and then to let Him work in the way He wanted. Our part was merely to show Christianity in action. All the rest was His doing.

Prayer: Lord, when I am hungry give me someone to feed; when I am thirsty give water for their thirst. When I am sad, give me someone to lift from sorrow. When burdens weigh upon me, lay upon my shoulders the burden of my fellows. Lord, when I stand greatly in need of tenderness, give me someone who yearns for love. May your will be my bread; your grace my strength; your love my resting place.

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