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THE DUTIES OF A CHRISTIAN (1): A WORK CHARACTERISTIC OF DE LA SALLE

What would Don Quixote have been without Cervantes? What would Cervantes be without Don Quixote? In the great masterpieces of human genius author and work are one. The work is a portrait of the author and in it he continues to live and speak to mankind.

For the seeker, who wishes to discover the personality of the author, the surest way and the most rewarding sources of study are to be found in his representative works, whatever their nature. For this reason and because I consider the treatise on "The Duties of A Christian" one of the best works that have come from the pen of de La Salle, I believe I can find in it the characteristic traits of the rich and many faceted personality of the man from Rheims. I shall confine myself, intentionally, to showing how "The Duties of A Christian" throws into relief the triple dimension of de La Salle as Founder, Theologian and Catechist.

1. THE FOUNDER

Charism attains its full dimension in the Founders of Congregations. Each Founder exemplifies in a concrete manner one of the many functions in the Mystical Body. For de La Salle it was to be "the christian education of poor children through the school". Providence led him gently and progressively to the difficult but effective task of redemption of ignorant and abandoned children.

The path of renunciation was signposted by painful episodes from the moment he took over the direction of his infant foundation: the heart-rending break with his family; the "nonsense" of distributing his goods to the poor when both he and the Brothers were starving; the "burning of his boats" when he resigned his canonry...

Nevertheless, all this, however heroic, did not exhaust the charism of the Founder of the Christian Schools. His sons, the Brothers, and their pupils needed to nourish their spirit, strengthen their will, warm their hearts and enlighten their faith. It was for this reason and with this aim that the Founder, without having had even a remote preparation for such work, became by necessity and by his charism of founder, a schoolmaster and pedagogue who deserved to have his name inscribed in the history of universal education.

His biographers show him to us at different moments in his intense and busy life, sometimes replacing a Brother in the classroom for a catechism lesson, at other times writing treatises on pedagogy, catechetics and asceticism for the use of the Brothers. "After having established all the practices and customs of the community (1695-1698) he turned his attention to providing it with works useful to the Brothers and their schools... catechisms of several kinds, simple for the pupils, more advanced and of greater depth for the Brothers, and all accompanied by moral precepts and pious practices. These are the sources from which the masters of the Christian Schools draw their enlightenment in order to explain the great mysteries of religion" (Blain).

Maillefer, a relative of the saint, also affirms that he composed "several works of piety as well for the instruction of the pupils as for the use of the Brothers who were in charge of them."

To which work is he referring? By that time (1714) almost all the writings of the saint had been published, including "The Duties of A Christian".

Blain goes into detail: "After having established all the practices and customs of the community he turned his attention to providing it with works useful to the Brothers and their schools... catechisms of several kinds..." Surely one of those catechisms was "The Duties of A Christian". What is more, the charism of the Founder reaches out beyond the religious family circle to other educators, to their pupils and to the faithful in general. The author of the preface to the edition of 1727 writes, "This catechism, full of solid and holy instruction, has been composed by its pious author for the benefit of persons engaged in teaching those who are sunk in deep ignorance of the mysteries of our holy religion." The vicar general of the diocese of Rouen, in his approval of the "The Duties of A Christian" in 1796, declares, "This work seems to us to be well adapted to the instruction of children and useful to the masters who teach them as well as to all sorts of people."

Whether de La Salle intended it or not, the fact remains that "The Duties of A Christian" provided the Brothers, lay teachers and catechists, for over a hundred years, with a solid and efficacious aid and at the same time served as a teaching manual of the faith for hundreds of thousands of French children. That was a product of the charism of de La Salle the Founder.

2. THE CATECHIST

The catechetical role of de La Salle is a consequence of his charism as Founder. It is in the seminary of Saint Sulpice that we must look for his catechetical formation. There he learned from the lips of remarkable catechists (Tronson... and especially Baüyn) the pedagogy of practical catechesis. Besides the weekly conference Baüyn gave an additional one each month which the seminarists were free to attend. This conference was devoted exclusively to practical catechetics: one of the most experienced catechists explained the catechism in the presence of the students. Could this have been the origin of our catechism of "formation"?

It was said of him, "A man so zealous for the salvation and sanctification of children inspired a similar zeal in many priests who passed through his hands. The most illustrious of these were de La Salle and Grignon de Montfort".

The biographer, Maillefer, describes the Founder and Superior of the Brothers thus: "He passed from row to row, instructing the children in the principles of the Christian life, speaking to them gently and inspiring in them docility, attention and modesty by

his affability. His reproofs, when necessary, produced fruit in the hearts of these young boys and a change in their conduct and manners soon became apparent. In a word he became a child among children. He enlightened their minds, touched their hearts, gave them the witness of his example and led them gently and spontaneously to a Christian "metanoia".

Could any catechetical method be better?

THE "PARENTAGE" OF "THE DUTIES OF A CHRISTIAN"

Blain presents an image of the catechist of Rheims writing "catechisms of various kinds, simple for the children, more advanced and of greater depth for the Brothers". This statement makes it possible for us to speak of "parentage" of "The Duties of A Christian" in which all the sections have common characteristics. Here are some of them:

UNITY

Unity defines a family. In that of "The Duties" all its members share the same spiritual heritage. The style and vocabulary, taking account of the demands of adaptation, are transmitted from one to the other, as is shown by internal criticism.

HIERARCHY

Family bonds and relationships differ with the members of a generation. In "The Duties", from the first part, which contains nearly five hundred pages, to the "*Profession of Ten Articles of Faith which the Christian must know and believe*", in one page, there is a grading of contents and methods to suit those for whom they are intended in conformity with the aim of each treatise. What is remarkable is their interdependence and mutual resemblance.

ESSENTIAL MEANING

As the members of a family grow away from their roots secondary traits tend to disappear but basic traits remain. Here again, de La Salle stands out as an eminent theologian and catechist in his own time and by his vision of the future. In the "*Little Summary*" often used in the catechisms on the *Principal Mysteries*, the Commandments of God and of the Church are merely listed but in several questions the themes of Christ, the Church, the Sacraments, particularly Penance and the Eucharist, are studied. He summarises himself but retains the essentials of the Christian message. De La Salle is more a catechist and theologian than a moralist.

WORKS COMPLEMENTARY TO "THE DUTIES OF A CHRISTIAN"

De La Salle says with the Apostle St. James, that faith without good works is dead; that we must practise the maxims of the Gospel; that we must live according to its teaching etc. For this purpose we have another catechetical work from the pen of de La Salle as a complement to "The Duties". It is sufficient to mention the chapter headings since we take it for granted that the reader knows the contents of the manual and the persons for whom it was intended: "Instructions and Prayers for Holy Mass", "Method of Preparing for a good Confession", "Instructions and Prayers for Holy Communion", "The Public Worship which Christians must give to God", "Exercises of Piety and Spiritual Canticles".

Even reading the titles of these works is enough to fill us with admiration, respect and gratitude.

HOLY SCRIPTURE IN "THE DUTIES OF A CHRISTIAN"

Revelation and Tradition constitute the leit motif of "The Duties". De La Salle is a master of Sacred Scripture. He venerates the Sacred Books and considers them as his first and principal rule of life... It is not surprising then that he uses them with consummate skill. In "The Duties" he employs them in various ways. Sometimes, but rarely, the scripture text appears verbatim, as when he lists the Commandments of Divine Law and reproduces the words of the institution of the Eucharist... Often he suits the biblical quotation to the text of "The Duties" as for example on the very first page which begins: "Jesus Christ saying in the Gospel that eternal life consists in knowing the one true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent on earth..."

In the evangelical introduction to the Decalogue we read: "Charity comprises two things: love of God and love of our neighbour. This is what Jesus Christ means when He says that there are really only two Commandments which comprise the whole Law. At other times he is content to say succinctly: "As the wise man says"; "as Jesus Christ says in the Gospel..." Many pages look like a scriptural arabesque but without the slightest allusion to the text or authors from which passages are taken. The chapters on the Life, Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus are masterpieces of adaptation.

In the Lasallian catechism there are numerous pages where passages of Scripture are so employed that they give the impression of being the author's own thoughts. The ideas and biblical expression combine so naturally that they become beliefs and precepts for both the author and the reader of "The Duties of A Christian". If you omitted the passages referred to, many pages of the work would have no meaning. What would be left of the treatise "De Deo"? of the creation of the angels? More importantly, what would be left of the Mystery of Redemption?

With the skill of an artist matching his colours, de La Salle moves from one evangelist to another to paint the multi-coloured life of the Word Incarnate, dead and risen again.

The alpha and omega of "The Duties" are expressed in two passages which make direct allusion to the Holy Gospel. We shall finish our reflections with them. The catechism opens with these words which are a programme in themselves: "Jesus Christ says in the Holy Gospel that eternal life consists in knowing the one true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent on earth. All that a Christian should strive for in this life is to know God in Himself and in all that He has made, and the Son of God made man and all He has done for our salvation, that is to say, the *Gospel*."

When de La Salle puts the last touches to the dome of the classical edifice of "The Duties of A Christian" he places there the living stone of the Word: "The principal effect that these prayers should produce in us is to lead us to *practise the maxims of the Holy Gospel*. It is also the greatest benefit we can draw from the knowledge (cf Prologue) of the Sacred Mysteries and the teaching of the Church."

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