

THE DUTIES OF A CHRISTIAN (3): DE LA SALLE HIMSELF

A writer in the seventeenth century had a very different concept of literary proprietorship from that which forms the basis of modern laws of copyright. It was quite common to find paragraphs, pages and even whole chapters taken from other authors without the slightest acknowledgement. De La Salle was no exception. As one of his commentators writes, "He took spiritual nourishment from wherever he found it". Nevertheless, thanks to his wide knowledge of theology and catechetics, he was able to use his sources with such skill that it is difficult to tell what is his own from what he took from them.

THE FAITH

Most catechisms of the Founder's time, faithful to Bellarmine, stress the objective aspect of faith rather than personal adherence to the message and its Author. De La Salle, without neglecting the "*fides quae creditur*" stresses the "*fides qua creditur*".

In his Meditations we frequently find the concept of faith as a personal commitment. In "The Duties of A Christian" he gives us this beautiful definition: "Divine faith is a virtue which leads us to believe, with submission of mind and heart, what God has revealed and with steadfastness all that the Church proposes to our belief". Who could fail to see in the expression "submission of mind and heart" the binomial subjective-objective: the faith which enlightens us and the faith to which we adhere? We also find in his definition God who speaks and the Church which guarantees the message.

In "The Duties of A Christian" Part II, the definition of faith leaves no room for doubt as to its dynamism and is far removed from the objectivist definitions of most catechisms of the period. Here it is: "It is to believe that God is good, that He is our last end and to put all our confidence in him". Adherence to a person; confidence in a person, without restriction, absolutely. In another part of the "Duties" he stresses the vital commitment that the faith demands from believers. "It would be useless for Christians to have the faith and to believe in the eternal truths that Jesus came to announce and that the Church proposes to their belief if their faith were not animated by charity and accompanied by good works".

THE LAW THAT SAVES

I point out elsewhere that in "De Praeceptis" de La Salle follows Joly closely. The reader may well ask in what then the Founder's originality consists. It is in the foundations on which he bases the precepts of Sinai. Here as in Chapter XVI of the Rule he draws from Saint Augustine and more so from Christ Himself. In thirteen pages redolent of the Gospel he affirms with the Apostle that Love is the fulfilment of the Law. In the introduction to "The Duties of A Christian" we find a resumé of the links between charity and the commandments. "We are in this world only to love God and we have religion only to the extent that we love Him. We cannot please God without loving Him and this love of God is so necessary that it is He alone who can help us to keep his commandments in a Christian manner and who can give and preserve the life of our soul, for it can live only in so far as it possesses grace and charity. This is what led St. John to assure us that he who does not love God remains in death, that is to say, that he is before God as one who is already dead".

SIN

Many catechisms, contemporaneous with "The Duties of A Christian", confine themselves to pointing out the relation "Sin - Commandments" because "God gave us these in order to avoid those". De La Salle, on the other hand, introduces personal relationship into the concept of sin.

Evil, the enormity and ingratitude of sin, can only be understood in the contemplation of Christ on the Cross. In the prelude to the story of the Passion in "The Duties" we read these words, "The principal reason for the coming of Christ into this world having been to suffer and die for the sins of mankind" and at the moment when the curtain comes down on the drama of Calvary, "That is what Jesus Christ suffered for love of us. He could have avoided all that suffering and that shameful death. One drop of his blood would have sufficed but He offered himself voluntarily to make us understand the enormity of sin and to show the excess of his love for us..."

De La Salle considers sin not only as a legal transgression or as an evil inflicted by the sinner on himself, but as a NO addressed to the God of love, as a gesture of contempt for the sufferings and merits of Jesus Christ. In a word, a refusal of the call of God to supernatural communion. That is the concept of sin, and not any other, that Divine Revelation has transmitted to us.

THE SACRAMENTS

The fact that the treatise "De Sacramentis" takes up almost the whole of the first half of "The Duties of A Christian" — two hundred pages to be precise — justifies the opinion that the work is more theological and dynamic than moralising.

The catechisms of the eighteenth century, following Bellarmine, accustomed us to considering the Sacraments more as means of fulfilling our duties than as sources of grace and holiness. De La Salle, on the contrary, puts the emphasis on the sanctifying grace that they produce. The pre-eminence given to grace is evident in the long prologue by which he introduces the Sacraments and in which he shows how grace depends, essentially, on them.

JESUS CHRIST AND THE SACRAMENTS

In dealing with the relationship between the sacraments and Jesus Christ many of the catechisms mentioned did so in a rather superficial manner, confining themselves to the institution of the sacraments without entering into the essential bonds and the actual dependence of the signs of salvation on the One Mediator. "The Duties of A Christian" shows in sober language and with theological precision the triple relationship that the sacraments have with the person of Christ. "It is Jesus Christ who is the author of all the sacraments of the New Law, having come on earth to sanctify men and having won for them many graces and merits by his death. He found means of applying his graces and merits to them through the sacraments He instituted for this purpose. It is He, also, who produces them in time and who is their first cause. The men who administer them are, as it were, only the instruments though they are the dispensers of the mysteries, for as St. John says, it is He (Christ) who baptizes."

THE SACRAMENTS IN THE CHURCH

The theologian from Rheims does not forget and wants his readers to know that the sacraments are given *in the Church*, "dispensatrix of all the merits and satisfaction of Jesus Christ." It is she who, in accord with Holy Scripture, decides in matters concerning the sacraments... establishes or changes, when she judges it necessary for the faithful, this or that ceremony.

Not only are the sacraments given *in the Church* but they are given *for the Church*, "for they are very necessary for the good of the Church because of the effects which they produce..."

THE SACRAMENTS AND CHRISTIAN LIFE

By means of the sacraments the life of Christ is communicated to and developed in the souls of the baptized. "It is by Baptism that we are engendered in Jesus Christ. By Confirmation we receive strength and an increase of grace. It is by the Eucharist, as by spiritual food, that our souls are nourished. Penance heals our souls, wounded by sin; Extreme Unction takes away the remains of sin and gives us a special strength... Holy Orders gives power to the ministers of the Church to govern it. Marriage is for the procreation of children and for bringing them up in the love and service of God."

CEREMONIES OF THE SACRAMENTS

The detailed explanation of the liturgical ceremonies — those most holy ceremonies, most worthy of respect and capable of inspiring devotion... and of instructing the faithful — together with the attention given to the sacraments in the life of the Christian, places "The Duties of A Christian" in a class above most of the French school catechisms of the seventeenth century and clearly shows its originality.

Though the ceremonies, of themselves, add nothing to the essentials of the sacraments "it would be a great sin to omit them without necessity because they were handed on to us by tradition". This is the reason why the Church so frequently urges pastors "to explain them to the Christian people" in the knowledge that understanding of the ceremonies contributes much to the reception of the sacrament. Such instruction will obviate a magical concept of the rubrics since "these graces are only given in view of their faith and devotion and not in virtue of the ceremonies", though he does admit that some ceremonies produce grace in virtue of the prayers of the Church.

The insistence of de La Salle on the spiritual meaning of the ceremonies in the life of the Christian is remarkable. For example, the ceremony of putting salt in the mouth of the person to be baptized "is to mark that, freed from all corruption, he receives Divine Wisdom which gives him a taste for spiritual things and for the practices of a Christian life".

PRAYER

The ninety pages consecrated to the *second means* of obtaining the graces necessary for salvation speak eloquently of the role he assigned to it. The definition he gives of prayer is of the best catechetical vintage: "Prayer is an application of the mind and an elevation of the heart to God to worship Him and to ask for all the things we need for our salvation." He employs, once again, the terms *mind and heart*. Before asking we must adore, thank and offer ourselves...

In four closely reasoned pages he analyses and comments on each element of the definition, bringing out his precise concept of the theme on the theological and catechetical planes.

The writings of the Fathers of the Church are the most abundant source of the treatise "De Oratione". Chrysostom, Augustine, Ambrose... lend their spiritual authority to the filial relations and dependence of man in relation to God the Father. It is these same authorities whose works illuminate the Meditations of the saint.

It is on purpose that I omit two themes in which the originality and theological depth of de La Salle surpass in breadth and quality the treatises of the period, including the sources from which he drew his inspiration: they are Jesus Christ and the Church. The limits imposed by this article preclude consideration of such doctrinal richness. Perhaps we shall deal with them on another occasion. What I have shown proves sufficiently that de La Salle deserved the title of Doctor of Theology, conferred on him by the University of Rheims, and that he did honour to that institution.

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