

## THE DUTIES OF A CHRISTIAN AND PRESENT DAY CATECHESIS (4)

Like the prophets, every founder of a religious family is called by God, with a charism for the men of his time and for future generations. Because of this twofold mission, his message in the Church contains transitory components and others which transcend time and space. A quick glance at St. John Baptist de La Salle will confirm this statement.

After three centuries, the Brothers, his sons, continue to obey his command: "Go and teach". His writings had the validity and the vigour of a "norm" for his contemporaries and yet his message still today inspires texts which respond strictly to the "signs of the times". Proof of this can be found in chapters I, II and III of the Rules in which he describes one after the other, the identity and the need of the Institute and the threefold spirit which should animate its members: the spirit of faith, of zeal, of community (God - the pupils - the Brothers). It is also seen in the personalist and personalizing pedagogy of the *Conduite*. The dignity and individuality of the person, enhanced in the light of the Gospel in the *Règles de la Bienséance*, proclaim it as also do the DEVOIRS I, the key and the paradigm of the "generation" of De La Salle's catechisms. Is this book of any interest to catechists according to Vatican II? I will try to give a summary of its aspects which are still suited to our times and which express the theological thought behind it.

### THE SOURCES

De La Salle quotes at length from the doctrine of Holy Scripture and the traditions of the Church. The number of quotations speak for themselves: Genesis 38 times, Exodus 11, Deuteronomy 13, Ruth 1, I Samuel 4, II Chronicles 1, Tobit 6, Judith 1, I Maccabees 1, Job 1, Psalms 25, Proverbs 1, Wisdom 2, Ecclesiastes 6, Isaiah 1, Jeremiah 2, Daniel 3, Joel 1, Habacuc 1, Matthew 140, Mark 16, Luke 60, John 58, Acts 24, Romans 15, I Corinthians 17, II Corinthians 4, Galatians 3, Ephesians 10, Philippians 1, Colossians 2, I Thessalonians 2, I Timothy 8, II Timothy 1, Titus 1, Hebrews 9, James 11, I Peter 2, I John 7, Apocalypse 4. (I do not think this is exhaustive).

**The Holy Fathers.** St. Augustin 48 times, St. J. Chrysostom 33, St. Ambrose 14, Tertullian 14, St. Cyprian 8, St. Thomas 8, St. Gregory 6, St. Jerome 4, St. Bernard 3, St. Cyril 3, St. Basil 2, St. R. Bellarmine 2, and *once*: St. Denis, St. Ephrem, St. Evariste, St. Isidore, St. Leo, St. Nicholas, Pope St. Pius V, and Theodoret.

### JESUS CHRIST

In the "Devoirs", one finds JESUS Christ as the central figure and, as a living breath, the HOLY SPIRIT, who is the Spirit of Jesus Christ. I will limit myself to quoting the titles of as many chapters on the person of Jesus Christ as one could find in the "Devoirs": Jesus Christ Redeemer, Jesus Christ Saviour, Jesus Christ Mediator, Jesus Christ Priest, Jesus Christ Head of the Mystic Body, JESUS CHRIST IN THE GOSPEL: the Master, Jesus Christ of the poor, the Way, the Truth and the Life, Jesus Christ Model of the Christian, etc.

The life of Jesus Christ as presented in the "Devoirs" gives an admirable summary of the four Evangelists... We could sum up the leitmotif of the "Devoirs" in the following words: "The faithful are the members of Jesus Christ and, to be considered as such, they must be *united to him through charity*".

### THE CHURCH (Body of Christ)

The chapters on the Church in the "Devoirs" are, I think, the Saint's richest and most original. While most of the catechisms of that time stressed the "juridical" aspect of the Church, the "Devoirs" declare: "There has always been a Church even before Jesus Christ". It differed from the present Church in that it "was not composed of a visible society of faithful, as... now"; but the essential constituent elements are the same in both cases: faith and the

anticipated merits of Jesus Christ by which God saved the believers of that time "united to God by the faith and the charity which animated them".

Here is the definition he gives of the Church: "It is the society of all the faithful whether living or dead, who are all united in Jesus Christ". Can anything better be said and in fewer words?

## THE LAW OF LOVE

The treatise "*De Præceptis*" is De La Salle's least original work, but it is redeemed by the moralism of its source (Claude Joly) in the THIRTY introductory pages to the Decalogue. In it, with the Gospel in hand, he leaves no doubt that, for him, the first and principal rule is the Gospel, that is to say "the law of love": love of God above all things, and the love of one's neighbour for God's sake.

## SIN

De La Salle transcends the relationship between sin and the commandments. He introduces the personal aspect of sin into his Catechism: "The principal reason for Jesus Christ coming into this world being to suffer and die for the sins of all men...". "This is what Jesus Christ suffered for love of us..." but he offered himself willingly to make us realize better *the enormity of sin, to show his excessive love for us*.

De La Salle, therefore, does not see sin as a simple transgression of the Law of God, but as a NO which the sinner opposes to the love of God, as contempt for the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

## THE SACRAMENTS

The catechisms of the Saint's times look on the sacraments *as a means of performing one's duties* rather than *as a source of grace*. For the Saint of Rheims, on the other hand, the sacraments are SOURCES OF SANCTIFYING GRACE, *means of uniting us intimately with Jesus Christ*.

### a) Jesus Christ and the Sacraments

"Jesus Christ is the author of all the Sacraments" ... "It is he who produced them in time...", and again: "It is He who baptizes".

### b) The Church and the Sacraments

"The Church is the dispenser of all the merits and satisfaction of Jesus Christ" ... Not only are the Sacraments given *in the Church*: "She establishes or modifies such and such a ceremony when she judges it to be necessary for the good of the faithful...", but they are also given *for the Church*: "They are very necessary for the good of the Church because of the different effects they produce...".

### c) Sacraments and Christian life

Through the Sacraments, Christ's life is propagated in the Christian. De La Salle knew it and wanted those he catechized to know it; for this purpose he quotes a long passage from the Catechism of Trent: "It is by Baptism that we are begotten in Jesus Christ; by Confirmation we receive strength and an increase in grace...".

Space is too limited to make even a short reference to the originality and riches of the Sacramental Ceremonies in the "Devoirs".

## PRAYER

Catechism must end in prayer: put those catechized in relation with the Father. It is for this reason that the "Devoirs" ends with a treatise "*De Oratione*". EIGHTY pages of the highest evangelical quality form the apex of De La Salle's catechetical edifice. We will close with the precious definition which he gives of prayer: "Prayer is an application of *our mind* and an elevation of *our heart to God*, to render Him our respect and to ask him for all the things we need for our salvation". Before asking: *adore, thank... render honour*. Always the same binomial: *spirit-heart: thanks-love*.

Bro. Manuel MAGAZ

Marquès de Mondéjar 32 - MADRID-28 - SPAIN