

## THE PRINCIPAL MYSTERIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY AND CATECHESIS OF ST. J.B. DE LA SALLE

"You lay the foundations for the building of the Church when you instruct children in the mystery of the most Holy Trinity and the mysteries accomplished by Jesus Christ when he was here on earth." *Seventh Meditation for Time of Retreat*, Loes translation p. 66.

This quotation may be taken as programmatic for this short article, for the catechetical aspect of it at least. In it St de La Salle incidentally and unselfconsciously states what he understands by the term, the Principal Mysteries. We might compare the answer of a traditional catechism to show the closeness of the parallel: "There are two Principal Mysteries of religion: 1st, the Unity and Trinity of God; 2nd, the Birth, Death and Resurrection of Christ our Saviour." (*Australian Catechism*, 18th ed. 1962; this catechism derives largely from the *Maynooth Catechism*, itself closely related to well known French catechisms of the 17th and 18th centuries.)

It is significant that in the very opening pages of the *Meditations for Time of Retreat*, de La Salle reminds the Brothers that they are "administrators of God's mysteries" (p. 47). Elsewhere he sums up their catechetical mission as being "to provide children with a Christian mentality and to teach them the mysteries and doctrines of our religion" (p. 60).

Further, he reminds them that "there are a number of doctrines which are absolutely necessary for us to know in order to be saved" (p. 51). These doctrines are in fact those of the Trinity of Persons in God and the Redemptive Incarnation of the Son of God.

### THE BROTHERS' SPIRITUALITY

St. de La Salle makes no express attempt to base the Brothers' spiritual life upon the contemplation of the Blessed Trinity (indeed the present *Rule* seems much more explicit on this point; cf. Chap. 10, art.j). But it is clear that he presupposes such a basis. Even a cursory reading of the *Meditations for Sundays and Feasts*, more especially those meditations devoted to aspects of Christ's redemptive mission, make it quite clear that the Brothers' spiritual life is to be based upon a deep awareness of the object of their faith and of the practical lived consequences of such faith. This is simply what *the spirit of faith* is: the Brother *believes* with all his mind and all his heart what the Church teaches in her Creeds and catechisms (cf. Meditation No. 5: Sunday in Octave of Christmas, Battersby translation 1964 ed. p. 26) and he lives his life accordingly.

St. de La Salle could easily make his own what Pope John Paul II said recently when speaking of Christ's redemptive mission: "We must have our minds and hearts open to receive this manifestation (of Christ) which is not meant to be so much a knowledge of the mystery of Christ as our *immersion* and our absorption into it" (O.R. 23 Jan. 1984, p. 3, col. 3; emphasis in the original).

### FROM THE BROTHER'S SPIRITUALITY TO HIS CATECHESIS

The union between the spiritual life of the Brother and his zeal as a Christian educator is so close that each not only sustains the other but each finds its natural expression in the other. This is commonplace in the thought of St. de La Salle; but it finds explicit expression in his Meditation for Trinity Sunday: "(This mystery) is the more adorable for you as you are obliged to teach it and make it known to children who, like you, are by baptism consecrated to the Most Holy Trinity. They bear the marks of this consecration in their soul and to this adorable mystery they owe the unction of grace which has been applied to their soul" (Battersby, p. 202).

### THE PRINCIPAL MYSTERIES IN THE BROTHERS' CATECHESIS

One of the injunctions of the *Rule* as I learnt it was that, of the total time to be devoted to catechesis — four and a half hours a week — one half-hour of the Sunday school session was to be devoted to catechesis on the Principal Mysteries. Though perhaps conceived mainly in terms of revision of knowledge already imparted and assimilated, nothing in this prescription of the *Rule* would exclude an ever-deepening and, as we would say today, an "interiorising" of these Mysteries by both Brother and pupil.

And perhaps of at least equal importance as this weekly return to an explicit recall of the Principal Mysteries would be the careful insistence on reverence in making the Sign of the Cross, in bowing the head at the Gloria Patri, in teaching oneself and then one's pupils to relish rather than to avoid the formal trinitarian conclusion which characterises the liturgical prayers...

## DOCTRINAL OR PRACTICAL EMPHASIS?

It must be admitted that in the *Meditations for Time of Retreat* St. de La Salle's manner of referring to the doctrinal aspects of catechesis is somewhat disconcerting: much of what he says might be read in a dismissive sense. He seems sometimes to imply that knowledge of "the truths that are purely doctrinal" is of less importance than that of "the practical truths of the gospel". (Or does this impression derive more from the translation — Loes — than from the original? Concerning the expression "truths that are purely doctrinal" Br. Loes explains in *Appendix C* that this is his paraphrase for what seems to me to be a rather different expression.)

It would, however, be quite false to the mind of our Founder so to force the contrast, which he makes for his own reason of emphasis, to make it sound like the equivalent of the contemporary opposition of orthodoxy to orthopraxis. (Cf. *Catechesi Tradendae* No. 22)

What St. de La Salle has in mind is simply the ageless truth that, to be effectively salvific, faith must be *living*, that is animated by supernatural charity (cf. Loes p. 60). For, if faith without works is dead, so are works without faith. One must believe and one must do; and one must both believe and do at the same time: there is no room for choice. "It is useless to play off orthopraxis against orthodoxy: Christianity is inseparably both." (*Catechesi Tradendae* No. 22)

For St. de La Salle faith and morals are inseparable: "Contradicting the morality preached by Jesus Christ is quite as dangerous as attacking His doctrine, for the loss of faith generally results from depraved morals." (Battersby, p. 27)

Any conflict, then, which we may seem to discern between "the purely doctrinal truths" (Loes), which would obviously include the Principal Mysteries, and "the practical truths of the gospel" would exist rather in the contemporary mind than in the mind of our Founder.

## PLACE FOR TEACHING THE PRINCIPAL MYSTERIES IN CONTEMPORARY CATECHETICS

It seems to me that the contemporary orientation of catechetics leaves little place for catechesis on the Principal Mysteries.

First, this orientation is — excessively — anthropocentric. It starts with man, "starts with where the pupils are" — a principle not wrong in itself — but often it seems to have no desire to transcend that starting point. But surely one of the essential objectives of catechesis should be to draw attention to God and away from oneself?

Again, it is excessively socially-oriented: it seems to be too much concerned with man and his moral problems, with the structures of society, and too little with faith-knowledge of the world of divine realities, especially of the mystery of grace operating through the sacramental economy; and of the world of divinely assured certainties made available to us in the Church's magisterium.

I am sure that I could use Pope John Paul's Exhortation on *Catechesis in Our Time* (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 1979) to illustrate my contention that the basic programme of catechesis at every level should be the Creed, an approach which would permit of limitless deepening if one so wished (Cf. *Catechesi Tradendae*, Nos. 28, 59, 61; more especially for the Principal Mysteries, Nos. 37, 38, 48).

The depreciation of the doctrinal aspect of catechesis in favour of what, for the sake of brevity, I am rather unwillingly calling the moral dimension, derives mainly from an inadequate concept of faith: a concept which underplays the part of the believing mind and exalts the part of the trusting heart. Space does not permit me to explain myself further. I have done so at length elsewhere.

For myself, reading the *Meditations* of St. de La Salle and any others of his writings, I note how *serene is his faith*: there is no evidence anywhere of reticence, of hesitation, or of suspended judgment, concerning anything proposed by the Church; his faith is co-extensive with the total content of the teaching of the Church (cf., again, Battersby p. 26). And from this serene faith follows a clear and consistent practice, clearly exemplified in loyalty to the Church's teaching.

## CONCLUSION

Let me ask the question St. de La Salle puts to his original readers: "Have you studied well all these truths up to the present and are you thoroughly committed to their making a strong impression on the minds of these children? Have you regarded this responsibility as the most important in your work? From this moment take the steps to make it your main concern to teach perfectly the truths of faith and the practical maxims of the holy gospel to those who are entrusted to you" (Loes, p. 63).

It seems to me that for ourselves personally, as Christians and as religious, it is question of our once more coming to recognize that "the fundamental act of religion (is) the adoring acceptance of the sway of mystery in dedicated love". (Rahner, *Theological Investigations IV* p. 61; Eng.tr.) On such a contemplative basis the Brothers can build an appropriate catechetical mission. All zeal stems from, and is conditioned by, supernatural faith.

Bro. Christian MOE, FSC

Holy Trinity Teachers' College

P.O. 274 - Mount Hagen, W.H.P. - PAPUA-NEW GUINEA