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THE TENDERNESS OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE A characteristic beloved of children and young people

GENERAL SITUATION

Lebanese youth has been deeply marked by the fires of war during the last nine years. Family, school and social life has been disrupted. Besides, Lebanese schools differ so widely as regards ideology, cultural level and moral and religious standards that those of the Brothers must give evidence of very special values if they are not to be regarded as just a few among many others without any distinguishing characteristics. If Lasallian schools in the Lebanon have a high reputation it is due more to comparison with others than to any intrinsic merit they may have. But the prestige of the Brothers' establishments among both Christians and Moslems is beyond question. There are, of course, defects in the system and the atmosphere in which we work is far from favourable, yet the student educated in the Brothers' schools considers himself privileged in comparison with his peers in other schools.

As child and adolescent, the student moves from class to class and, one way or another, acquires knowledge and develops a certain spirit which, without being necessarily Lasallian, is not far removed from it. This is due, in large measure, to the fact that the Brothers still form 8% of the teaching staff.

PARTICULAR SITUATION

At all times and more particularly in conditions of continual war, pupil and teacher experience a special need of affection and understanding. Thinking particularly of the pupil, I can affirm that he expects from me, a De La Salle Brother, much more than I give him. Worried by the constant threat of violence, deafened by the explosion of missiles and of hatred, stricken directly by the deaths of his loved ones or indirectly by those of his neighbours, and disheartened by an insecure future, he must find a motive for living. Only adults who have a living faith and a hope proof against all trials, can give him confidence. Nothing is more reassuring than a love which resembles that of God. But the daily worries of parents, the indifference of those who should sympathise with and help him, the display of luxury by some people, fear, life in the shelters and internal tensions in families destroy this love or render it rare or unhealthy.

A PASTOR'S TENDERNESS

By speaking to a Lebanese child or young person of the goodness of St. John Baptist de La Salle and by giving him tangible proofs of it in your relations with that person, you open up to him ways of calming his nerves and warming his heart. He is moved and attracted by the serenity of the saint when he realizes all the depth of love in his life and work. I must show him de La Salle as a man who had a motive for living, love for young people and care for their salvation. He will then raise his eyes to the Good Shepherd who never deserts his flock even when he sees the wolf coming. The image of the Good Shepherd so moved our saint that he frequently returns to it in his Meditations.

"They should manifest great tenderness for the souls confided to them so that anything which might be capable of injuring or wounding these souls will call for their attention. In this manner the sheep will love the shepherd and be pleased in his company since they will find therein their repose and their relief." (33rd Meditation, 2nd point)

One would think that this text was written for me, today, in my position as a Brother in the midst of young Lebanese, victims of so much violence. The grace to love more is the grace, par excellence, of my "today", a grace which must increase in my heart through prayer to the true shepherd of the flock.

THE BROTHER AS SACRAMENT OF LOVE

"Picture Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, puts it on his shoulders and carries it back to the flock; since you take his place, consider yourself obliged to do the same."

Like Jesus, John Baptist de La Salle "had pity on the people (the children) without a shepherd" and from all appearances, left in the hands of mercenaries. This is, unfortunately, the case with the youth of Lebanon. Extremist ideologies pretend to offer salvation to man.

"Having sacrificed his life for theirs, to make them good Christians and worthy sons of the Church, he asks nothing less from his brothers." (175th Meditation, 3rd point)

How many faces are brightened by the Brother's smile, his welcome, his attention, and his kindly word which is none other than the word of Jesus who speaks through his mouth. The respect and affection given to the child helps him to become more aware of his dignity as a younger brother of Jesus. This in no way affects the firmness required for a good Christian and human education. A boy who feels unloved will respond unwillingly to our approaches. Distrustful, he closes up and submits only under constraint. He "recognises the good shepherd" by his kindly manner, divines the noble motives which make him act and trusts him without complexes. On the other hand, he quickly unmask the mercenary behind the most subtle disguises. The great test is love. He feels it and is not deceived. His confidences reveal much on this matter.

I am judged by the love which makes me worthy of his attention and admiration, in which case I become for him a bearer of the Good News and a model to imitate. I awaken in his heart a desire for truth and love, for openness and intimacy with Jesus Christ.

"You have poor children to teach every day. Love them tenderly after the example of Jesus Christ". (111th Meditation, 2nd point)

"The greater the tenderness you show for the members of Jesus Christ and of his Church, the more wonderful will be the effects of grace which God will produce in them."

"The salvific action of God in their regard is expressed first and above all by the tenderness of his gratuitous love of which the Brother becomes for them the visible sacrament". (Announcing the Good News to the Poor, p. 327)

In the "Management of Schools" de La Salle recommends that "a new teacher should always have a joyful air, a calm expression and an outward appearance which suggests a solid character, full of kindness" (Management of Schools, Brother Anselme, p. 308). That is because in the eyes of the pupils the Brother is the ambassador of Jesus Christ, the one who writes his letter on the heart of the young. This noble mission demands a lot of patience and much tenderness.

"You must consider the obligation you have to win their hearts as the principal means of getting them to live in a Christian manner." (111th Meditation, 3rd point)

"Do you avail yourself of the affection the children have for you to attract them to God?" (101st Meditation, 3rd point)

DISCIPLES

A pupil becomes a disciple when he has formed a real bond of friendship with the Brother in whom he finds a model to imitate. He will have for him a loving respect which will lead him to seek his guidance in time of trouble or when he has a serious decision to make. The Brother, for his part, will direct his disciple to the one true Master, source of all tenderness. "Learn of Me because I am meek and humble of heart... Come to Me all you who labour and are heavy burdened and I will refresh you".

As a brilliant teacher the Brother may dazzle the pupil's mind, as an expert organiser he is not without influence on young people, but with a warm heart he has a deeper impact which lasts beyond school and influences the life of the person and his future relationships.

AT WHAT PRICE?

Such an attitude of kindness demands as much from me as it did from St. John Baptist de La Salle: a spirit of faith and zeal, self abnegation, the generous gift of myself. Far from being merely a question of temperament or a hobby, it involves my honesty, my authenticity, my fidelity and my consecration. It is not enough to know theoretically about the love of the Founder for young people, I must be in a position to draw that love, and the manner of speaking about it, at its source. I must employ the same means as he did: meditation, the Eucharist, Penance, interior life, living with young people in order to get to know them and allow them to discover through personal contact how much I am interested in them and how much I love them with a strong, pure love.

A witness only is credible; a witness to Someone who is not distant like a character from history, but who becomes present through my relations and reactions. I must be able to experience his presence within me and in the young person to whom I speak so that "it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me". "His Spirit alone can touch hearts". "He asks this miracle of me and helps me to perform it", according to St. John Baptist de La Salle.

THE COMMUNITY

The witness of kindness is also an obligation for the Community. My personal role retains all its importance but it can be neutralized. Serious, continuous and concerted action on the part of the Community is necessary to inspire in the young reflexes of confidence in each Brother. A warm homely atmosphere must be created in our educative communities. Is not this the only way to contribute to "the work of God" in the souls of the Lebanese boys who attend our schools?

EXPERIMENTS IN AWARENESS

With this end in view we undertook, three years ago, to sensitize our lay collaborators to the person of St. John Baptist de La Salle. Organized courses, extending over two years and illustrated by films and films strips etc. were attended by over two hundred of our lay teachers. To encourage their participation we paid them for the time involved. Several of them did not conceal their satisfaction at discovering a patron and father in their educative mission. In the schools certain relationships have shown a decided improvement as a result of these courses.

It is but a beginning and the first step of a very long journey.

Bro. Ildelfonse KHOURY, FSC
BEIT-MÉRY, LEBANON