

## JOHN-BAPTIST DE LA SALLE: THE MESSAGE OF HIS CATECHISM

At the beginning of 1985, Brother Jean Pungier, who is one of the Lasallian researchers in the Mother House, published in Rome a book entitled, *John Baptist De La Salle: The Message of His Catechism*. This work followed two previous studies by the same author, *Ministers of Grace*, and *If We Were to Re-Write «How to Run Christian Schools» Today*.

*Lasalliana* wanted to know what were the author's intentions and conclusions, so we interviewed him. Our questions and his responses follow.

### 1) **Brother Jean, why did you write this book?**

The title of the book is in itself explicit: «John Baptist De La Salle: the Message of His Catechism». It is neither a theological nor a historical thesis on The Duties of a Christian Towards God, but rather an essay.

What I have endeavoured to do, in fact, is to emphasize what the Founder wished to convey to his Brothers in the field of catechesis. I do this, not through the five books which comprise his catechetical work, but rather through the little «catechism», in question and answer form, which, following the lead of Brother Magaz, I call, Duties II.

Such elementary catechisms were multiplied in the seventeenth century. Every bishop either composed his own catechism or commissioned somebody to do so, and imposed it on the clergy of his diocese. Other manuals sprung up in response to more specific needs: many priests wanted to spread these «lessons» or «instructions» which they scattered to the four corners of France, during the «missions» either in the countryside or in the cities.

It was in this context that the Founder wrote his *Duties II*. As I said in the Foreword, «He composed it at Vaugirard, in a suburb of Paris, at a time when the Diocese had and was imposing its own text: when Father de La Chetardye, the pastor of the parish of Saint Sulpice where the Brothers were teaching, was a catechist of renown and who, several years before, had written a famous catechetical work». The question could really be asked as to why John Baptist De La Salle decided to write his own catechism. Was it to say what was closest to his heart? To render some service towards the Brothers?

I have tried to answer these questions. Have I succeeded in doing so? Well, that is up to the readers to judge!

### 2) **Have some previous studies been done on «The Duties of a Christian» and, if so, where does your work stand with regard to them?**

To my knowledge, only one long and exhaustive study has been done on this Lasallian work. This was the doctoral thesis of Brother Manuel F. Magaz, now of the District of Central Spain. It is entitled, *A Catechism of France's Golden Age: The Duties of a Christian by Saint John Baptist De La Salle* (1968). I studied it very much before undertaking my own researches. This book gave me the general framework—both historical and theological—of the «Duties». Another thing for which I am indebted to it, in particular, is that it made me discover the interest in drawing minute parallels between the Lasallians texts and their sources. It is like suddenly coming upon our Founder at his desk, at the very time that he is working on his literary, theological, or spiritual creations.

The *Cahiers Lasalliens*, nos. 20 to 23, have provided me with reliable texts and indispensable bibliographies. The *Rivista Lasalliana* has given me very interesting studies on the theme. I am thinking particularly of the articles of Brother Dante. Thanks to this author, I have a better perception of how the Brothers at the beginning of the eighteenth century prepared their catechism lessons and how they developed them in class.

Many other works and articles have planted the seeds for my research and my reflection. I do not wish to drag out my answer, so I shall mention only the works of Brothers Michel Sauvage and Miguel Campos, those of Sister Elisabeth Germain and those of Brother J.C. Dhotel, very particularly his «Origins of the Modern Catechism», which I am often inclined to quote.

Where does my work stand with regard to these studies? I would say, in an «original» way. At least that is what I think! In fact, it is not the text itself of the «Duties» which is the object of my concern (although it does hold a great interest for me) but rather the *plan of John Baptist De La Salle*, his message, and especially *his message for today*. For example, look at Chapter II of the First Part. I tried to situate the «Duties» within the total educational plan of the Founder. De La Salle wanted to take up the challenge which was presented to the Church and society of his time by the situation of the children of workers and of the poor, namely, their ignorance of knowledge essential to their salvation and their ignorance of the basic elements of culture and good manners. The chapter underlines the profound aim of this Lasallian educational endeavour to raise up true disciples of Jesus Christ, and to set up, and put into practice, the best means of achieving this result.

**3) In your opinion, then, what is the essential message of this catechism?**

Before speaking about what is the essential message of John Baptist De La Salle which pervades «Duties II», I should like to say, first of all, that *this message is localized*.

My work insists on this aspect—at the risk perhaps of making what could be called the «present relevance of the message» less readable. The Founder's manual of catechism was produced at the end of seventeenth-century France. Its historical and culture roots seem to be in conflict with those of his source manuals of Claude Joly, Le Coreur and Paul Godet des Marais. The religious feelings of the period, its moral pessimism, ascetic and sacramental rigorism, are evident throughout many of the pages of the work. The manner in which the «Catechism lesson» was conceived, prepared, and delivered belong to pastoral and catechetical history.

I should like to add that because «Duties II» is «localized», it leads us to discover many of the aspects of the very personality of John Baptist De La Salle. It is very interesting to look at the writings of La Salle along side his original sources because what he chooses to use, how he arranges it, what he rejects are often very significant. It is a joy to discover it!

Let us get to your question, what in my opinion is the essential message of the catechism?. In answering the previous question, I have already said what, in my opinion, is the heart of Lasallian pastoral teaching and its aim: *to raise up true disciples of Jesus Christ*. It is the very objective of the entire first Instruction of Duties II. It is at the same time the starting point and the finishing point. You should read the very beautiful Treatise on Prayer with which the book ends. You will be as astonished as I was at the spiritual perspectives offered to these children of workers and of the poor who were enrolled in the Brothers' schools of that day. The Founder could not reveal his true self more than he has done in these pages: in them he explains his own way of praying, how he lived his own life under the gaze of a very loving Father, in union with Jesus Christ, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Read with this fundamental perspective, «Duties II» clearly reveals a treasury of teaching which is ever up to date. I shall cite as some strong elements in the message of John Baptist De La Salle, the trinitary characteristics of his theological and spiritual thought; his care to lead the children to the God who acts through history; the importance which he gives to the Gospel maxims and the links he establishes between them and the Holy Spirit; his concept of prayer as a duty rendered to God in the Church, as a life of intimacy with God the Father, in Jesus Christ, and with the Spirit, as spirituality in action: all that makes up the material of the day of a Christian lay person is lived in union with Jesus Christ, in conformity with His own sentiments, His own actions. It is very difficult for me to mention everything. There are so many notations, sometimes said merely in passing, and other developments which are strongly suggested about the faith, the Eucharist, Christian practices, devotion, etc. To cite an example, here is a short quotation:

Q. What is meant by praying to God with devotion?

A. It means to pray with great respect and with a tender and inner devotion toward God and all that pertains to Him.

So few words to get across to us what is essential!

**4) In your opinion, what studies remain to be done with regard to the entire «Duties of a Christian Towards God?»**

If we should look at the *Cahiers Lasalliens* nos. 20 to 23, you will notice that there are five different texts in the Duties series. Each one of them deserves to be studied by itself. Duties I and II (C.L. nos. 20 and 21) have continued to attract attention even until the present day; their sources are rather circumscribed: they have been the object of a thesis, several articles and my own work.

Duties III (C.L. n. 22), which treats «Of the external and public worship which Christians are bound to render to God...» has not been the object of any systematic study; its sources are unknown. This «Catechism for Feasts», using the seventeenth century nomenclature, doubtlessly contains a «Lasallian Message» which we could also discover.

An attentive study of the two Abridgements, both the Large one and the Small one, without doubt, would be of interest for a better understanding of John Baptist De La Salle and of his catechetical writings.

The field of research is therefore immense. It is wide open for those who are inclined towards this type of research.

**5) Finally, how would you summarize the idea of your book?**

I have already had the chance of expressing it when I said that my work does not so much seek to be an erudite work but rather to be a witness to an ENCOUNTER. It is an encounter with the Founder during the very act of conceiving and writing his catechism. It is a research into his educational thoughts and total pastoral ideas. Above all, it is a communion with his most profound desire of raising up veritable disciples of Christ from among the Brothers and their students, Christians, in the true sense of the word, who share the sentiments of their Divine Master and live according to his teachings, thus rendering their «duties» towards the Most Blessed Trinity, within this Society where the Holy Spirit dwells, the Church.

**6) Can your work be of any help to the needs of the Brothers Catechists of today?**

The Brothers, and the lay teachers, who have read «John Baptist De La Salle: the message of his Catechesis» or in lieu of this, at least the account of this interview, can themselves respond positively or negatively to this question. Personally, I would respond positively. Even though the life problems to which Duties II addressed itself are not the same as those of our epoch, the «Lasallian plan» is ever valid and challenging. John Baptist De La Salle was engaged in a catechetical endeavour directed toward his time. What about us? He wanted to raise up true disciples of Jesus Christ, within the milieu which he was given evangelize. What are we doing in ours?

Yes, it is the Founder himself who, through his catechism, is drawing us to this research and writing endeavour so that we can put into operation a catechism for the young people of today!

7) Thank you very much, Brother Jean.

**A Transcription made by  
Brother Léon LAURAIRE of his  
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