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THE VOCABULARY OF THE MEDITATIONS FOR THE TIME OF RETREAT

The project of the 'Vocabulaire lasallien'

Students of Lasallian spirituality will have learned with a pleasant sense of anticipation that a project of the Region of France is now under way for the issue in instalments of the massive compilation of Lasallian Vocabulary which has been in course of preparation at the Generalate, Rome, for a quarter of a century. Brother Maurice Hermans, General Editor of the *Cahiers Lasalliens*, began assembling the *Vocabulaire* in 1959 and, giving such time to the task as his many other commitments allowed, and working often alone but sometimes with valued collaborators, he has collected and card-indexed some 300,000 examples of the way the Founder used words in his writings. The source used for such references was the collection of the princeps editions of the Saint's works reproduced in Nos 12-25 of the *Cahiers Lasalliens*. The Region of France's project for issuing the *Vocabulaire* has been entrusted to Brother Daniel Hazard of 78a Rue de Sèvres, Paris. Brother Daniel envisages a total of six volumes of about 1000 pages each; a limited edition of 300 copies of each volume (in offset typescript format) will be available to subscribers. The first volume has in fact appeared and the others will follow, it is hoped, at approximate intervals of six months, the whole splendid undertaking being complete before the end of 1987.

A preview of what we may expect from the 'Vocabulaire Lasallien'

It so happens that we can obtain a good idea already of what we may expect to find in the *Vocabulaire Lasallien*, now that its volumes have begun to appear. As long ago as 1965, Brother Maurice Hermans, with the collaboration of Brother Michel Sauvage, compiled and published *Le Vocabulaire des Méditations pour le Temps de la Retraite*. 1104 words are listed in this, in alphabetical order, and the phrases exemplifying their use in the sixteen Retreat Meditations amount to 6376. As Brother Maurice explains in a preface to the work, the list of words presented is limited to verbs, substantives, adjectives and adjective-derived adverbs; it does not therefore exhaust the total vocabulary found in these meditations. Nevertheless, continues Brother Maurice, «such as it is, it certainly opens up the principal approaches to the thought of the author of the meditations.» Each word is accompanied by a list of brief phrases, sufficient already to give the reader an idea of how the word is used. But a convenient and original system of reference makes it easy, if desired, to locate in *Cahier Lasallien No 13's* reproduction of the princeps edition, the full context of the quoted fragment.

The particular interest of a 'Vocabulaire' of the retreat meditations

A concordance of the *Meditations for the Time of a Retreat* is of special interest because it may be said that this work represents the full flowering of St. John Baptist de La Salle's spiritual teaching on the vocation of the Christian teacher. The studies of modern Lasallian scholars have shown convincingly that the retreat meditations represent the Founder's retrospective contemplation, in the evening of his life, of God's dealings with him through the successive stages of his spiritual journey. Brother Michel Sauvage has captured this idea in an expressive metaphor: «Irresistibly one thinks of an alpine climber who has scaled by arduous stages a rugged mountain-face and from the summit looks back and recognises and understands the route he has followed...» (*Cahiers Lasalliens No. 1*, p. XXXV). Brother Miguel Campos describes these sixteen meditations as the Founder's «peak experience», an experience in which he discovers a present point of time loaded with the fulness of past history and carrying within itself the full potential of history still to be made. In these writings the Founder reveals his grasp of God's action in his life, preparing the way for him, calling him, and urging him forward from one revelational experience to another in the work he had summoned him to do.

These are impressive claims for a writing so slight in quantity, but no-one who has read Michel Sauvage's *Catéchèse et Laïcité* or Miguel Campos's doctoral thesis, published as Nos 45 and 46 of the *Cahiers Lasalliens*, can fail to be convinced of their appositeness or to accept Campos's word that the retreat meditations are one of the great texts of French spirituality of the seventeenth century. Such being the case, one approaches the *Vocabulaire* of this work with the expectation of making some interesting discoveries, and one is not disappointed. A few examples must suffice here.

Examples of what the 'Vocabulaire des MTR' suggests to us

Appropriately the substantive most used is *Dieu* which appears 187 times, and it would be possible to construct from these 187 examples a considerable Lasallian theology, using that term in its specific sense of the study of the nature of God. The God on whom the attention of the Founder is fixed in these meditations is the one addressed thus at the beginning of the first of the six new Eucharistic Prayers: «You do not leave us alone in our life's journey but are living and at work in the midst of us...». Merely looking through the list of usages we are aware that it is the immanence of God, rather than his transcendence, which here preoccupies the Founder. God, as manifested in the retreat meditations, is he who, having in his goodness created men, wishes that they all come to the knowledge of truth. He is himself this truth, but he has revealed it to men through Jesus Christ, the Apostles and the Church. He continues to call certain persons to be ministers of his word, so that salvation may be available to all. He is concerned about the plight of poor children whose lack of parental care exposes them to a life of ignorance and sin. He confides such children to the care of Christian teachers and calls upon those teachers to acquit themselves with zeal and love of the responsibility which he has placed upon them. He bestows special gifts on those

whom he calls to this work to enable them to carry out their ministry well. At the judgment he will require those who have received these gifts to give an account of the souls confided to them even before giving an account of their own souls. But he is bountiful in the rewards he bestows on those who have carried out their ministry well, rewards they will enjoy even in this life and which, in the next life, will be proportionate to the service they have rendered to the children who will then be their glory. No fewer than 55 of the passages containing the word *God* are directly quoted from Scripture - an illustration of the extent of the biblical inspiration of these sixteen meditations, a feature of them which the studies of Michel Sauvage, Luis Varela and Miguel Campos have enabled us to appreciate.

Appropriately too, the substantive used most frequently after the term *God* is the name *Jesus Christ* which appears 95 times, 31 of them in direct quotations from Scripture. It is noticeable that in these scriptural passages the Founder, unlike his master St. Paul, never uses the alternative forms 'Christ' or 'Jesus' or 'Christ Jesus', variations which are a subject of discussion among exegetes of Paul's letters. But in this he is only following the Amelote N.T. translation which, as Michel Sauvage has shown in *Cahier Lasallien Nol*, was his source for his scriptural quotations. What does, on the other hand, become clear, even from reading the mere list of phrases quoted in the «Vocabulaire» under the term *Jesus Christ*, is that the Christology revealed in the retreat meditations is profoundly Pauline. All the quotations using the term are from Paul, with the single exception of one from the *Acts of the Apostles*, but the remaining 64 manifest no less convincingly Paul's influence on the Founder's understanding of Christ. (Paul's own name, it may be mentioned in passing, occurs 29 times in the sixteen meditations).

After *Dieu* and *Jesus Christ*, the noun having the greatest number of references in the 'Vocabulaire' is *enfant* which appears 90 times, and this fact seems to symbolise that synthesis which was at the heart of St. de la Salle's spiritual understanding in general and of the retreat meditations in particular. I mean the synthesis expressed in the well-known dictum found in the *Collection of Short Treatises*: 'Make no distinction between what concerns your salvation and perfection and your duties of state.' Key notions in the Saint's pedagogy emerge from a mere numerical analysis of these 90 references. No fewer than 17 of them enshrine the idea that God, in his goodness, has specifically entrusted to the care of each Brother the pupils who frequent his classes. (A glance at the list of occurrences of the verbs *charger* — 25 times — and *confier* — also, coincidentally, 25 times — reinforces this concept). The Founder's finely-balanced awareness of children's capacity for ill and their potentiality for becoming 'true citizens of heaven' likewise emerges impressively from this list. With these references in mind, one is less surprised than might otherwise be the case, to discover that the substantive *zele* has 46 references in this 'Vocabulaire'. One discerns the profound contemplation which had led the Saint to place the spirit of zeal alongside that of faith as the characteristic spirit of his disciples. The term *foi* itself occurs 22 times in the retreat meditations.

Thanks to the labours of the three Lasallian scholars mentioned above we no longer need to be told that the retreat meditations are impregnated with holy scripture. 212 direct quotations have been identified together with many other clear allusions to the Bible. The way, indeed, in which the Founder has steeped himself in the sacred text and has seemed to make its vocabulary his own is well illustrated by the words *ministère* and *ministre*. Both words make their appearance in the first point of the first meditation, in each case in direct quotations from St. Paul, *ministère* in two passages from *II Corinthians* and *ministre* in a passage from *I Corinthians*. The Founder thus, as it were, acknowledges his source for the two terms which he then continues to use throughout the series of meditations, *ministère* 26 times and *ministre* 11 times. But reference to a New Testament Concordance shows that, in the sense in which the Founder took over the two terms, Paul himself uses 'ministry' 9 times in the letters and 'minister' 7 times: so that the Founder uses the former word seventeen times more than Paul himself and the latter word four times more. It seems a fair assumption that our Saint had been so profoundly impressed by the richness of the concept contained in Paul's usage that he had absorbed the two terms into his own vocabulary and used them freely and unselfconsciously to describe the work and role of his humble disciples — apostles in their sphere as Paul had been in his.

Concluding remark

The writer of this paper is conscious that all the above offers only a superficial and very incomplete look (based only on the substantives of the meditations) at *The Vocabulary of the Meditations for the Time of Retreat*. But his modest purpose is only to offer a preview of what we may expect from the great *Vocabulaire* of Lasallian spirituality now in process of being published. One additional point may be mentioned by way of conclusion, though this does not refer specifically to the Founder's book we have been considering. Readers who have had occasion to consult No 10 of the *Cahiers Lasalliens* will know that Brother Maurice Hermans has there already made use of the unpublished *Vocabulaire* as a means of checking the authenticity of the texts the biographer Blain purports to be quoting from the Founder. As Brother Maurice explains in a foreword: 'It happens fairly frequently that, having quoted an authentic passage of the Founder, Blain goes on to provide comments, reflexions or amplifications which seem to be in a different vein, even though the biographer is presenting them as the teaching of the Founder. Recourse to the *Vocabulaire lasallien* makes it possible, more than once, to detect a use by the biographer of words and expressions which never appear in the written work of John Baptist de La Salle'. The examples which occur in CL 10 of this method of checking Blain's dependability in particular cases provide an additional reason for feeling grateful to the Region of France for undertaking the publication of the *Vocabulaire*, as well as (it goes without saying) to Brother Maurice and his collaborators who laboured successfully to provide students of Lasallian spirituality and pedagogy, within and outside the Institute, with this magnificent concordance.

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