

## LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY: OUR HERITAGE (1)

Brother Superior, Brother Delegates:

Invited by the Preparatory Commission to speak to you on this morning, my first reaction was to refuse. A pessimistic humourist once stated: "Beware of the first impulse, it's the best". While I was trying to prepare this talk, I had a feeling of dizziness and panic. I was tempted to agree with the humourist and give up.

Lasallian spirituality? How would it be possible, in a few quarters of an hour even to simply define what the term means, let alone attempt to outline its content? Our heritage: how could I even pretend to take stock of it by myself during such a short period of preparation, in view of the General Chapter, which is itself the Institute in its most exalted expression? If there is a Lasallian heritage, it only exists in the living body that we form as a community, and this community utters no more authentic declaration concerning its identity and its mission than that which flows forth from the exchange, the confrontations and the prayer of the members of the Chapter (*Declaration 7, 1-3*). Finally, how could I add anything this Saturday morning, after such an intense week enriched by the contribution of exceptional men?

In order to prepare for this morning, I re-read the Lasallian texts: the "Method of Mental Prayer", the "Collection", the "Meditations" and even the "Letters". As I advanced along these paths which I'd so often followed, I had the feeling of walking in an unknown land, of discovering a familiar and yet strange universe, where a different language is spoken, not that to which we are accustomed. The question that arose was not so much "How to speak of John Baptist De La Salle today?", but "Why?".

We have come here, bringing with us all the questions and the uncertainty of the worlds we left behind. In different ways, these worlds are all marked by the economic crisis and the surge of technical changes which produce

unrestrained competition and present tremendous ethical problems in the field of genetics, of respect for life, of nuclear arms.

Socio-economic mechanisms make it possible for the "rich to become richer at the expense of the poor who get poorer". To be aware of this fact takes nothing away from the dramatic reality it denounces. Violence, terrorism, fanaticism and intolerance continue to create havoc. Almost everywhere, the Church finds itself in a situation of Diaspora. Indifference and secularism progress, while at the same time erratic, and more or less irrational, forms of religiosity make their appearance. (see J. Rigal: "Le Courage de la Mission", p. 28). The hopes, the searching, the aspirations, the anguish of the youth of the close of this century, live with us; they worry and stimulate us. At the same time we are preoccupied by the disillusioned relativism of some young people, by their fatalism caused by a feeling of helplessness and by their allergy to long-term commitments.

John Baptist de La Salle gives us no answers to these questions, nor to many others that one could enumerate. Why then should we make a detour by way of a spiritual author who is three hundred years old? Isn't that wasting our time, or worse still hiding behind an alibi?

As a matter of fact, there is a lot of talk nowadays, more and more explicit, about "refounding" religious orders. It would be easy to demonstrate how the last two General Chapters engaged the Institute in such a process of refoundation. They did so in conformity with the orientations of the Council on the renovation of religious congregations. The paradox is that the Institute, like the Council, only considered a "refoundation" in the light of a greater fidelity to the charism of the Founder.

A paradox? Only in appearance. What would become of the tree which is the Institute if it uprooted itself from the soil of its first planting? What would happen to the river if it cut itself off from its primary source? What could be the viability of a composite organism whose members are more and more diversified, decentralised, and autonomous, if there were no common point of reference to the original inspirational force to keep it united?

That is why, confronted with a deeper and deeper mutation, and a greater and greater diversification, this Chapter will often unite in a common effort to scrutinise the spirit and the

specific intentions of the Founder, according to the terms by which *Perfectae Caritatis* characterised fidelity to our origins. Thus, my intervention at the end of this week of beginning the Chapter, is worthwhile, and has a symbolical significance. It constitutes the sign of your common desire to make Lasallian inspiration one of the essential principles of the dynamics of renewal which will inhabit the 41st General Chapter and which will animate its work. For my part, I can measure the frailty and the precariousness of this fleeting, momentary sign: the principal object of this intervention should be to permit a sharing among yourselves, the Capitulants.

Foundation - Refoundation: like the Church, the Institute must be constantly re-born in the world, and even of the world. However, it is by being faithful to its own deep identity that it must be re-born. The simple idea that I would like to leave with you this morning is that the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools arose in history like a spiritual uprising which became a living body. In this sense, indeed, it is first of all to the force of spirituality that we can attribute our existence today, and it is certainly, and primarily, from spiritual dynamics that we must hope for renewal and re-foundation.

Among these spiritual dynamics, I think it is possible to retain four:

1. Setting out, as a Founder, to start a movement which is both powerful and fragile, de La Salle roots his Institute in the experience of the Spirit. He wants to build it on interior men, that is, men of the Spirit.

2. Led on an unforeseen path, to depart from his familiar universe in order to embrace another world, he perceives this step as an invitation to continue a journey of incarnation in the footsteps of Christ, and an ever-growing conformity to His mystery as Saviour.

3. Associated first, and quite by chance, with a group of teachers, he is led to making them his brothers, and to become their brother himself. He views the society that he wishes to establish, not only as a functioning body, but as a communion of persons in the image of the primitive community of Jerusalem, and he refers to it as to the unity of love in the Trinity.

4. Living this foundation, searching and feeling his way along, being constantly aware of its frailty, facing repeated crises which threatened to ruin everything, being led twenty times to the brink of ruin, living the precarious situation of each day, and the uncertainty of the day that would follow, de La Salle becomes one of the most peaceful and perhaps also one of the most pacifying witnesses of abandonment to God and to hope.

The limited time I have at my disposal and some personal fatigue will oblige me to shorten this programme which was too ambitious. I will only develop the first two points, and in conclusion I'll try if possible to speak of de La Salle's abandonment to God. At any rate, the idea of communion, which I will not speak about, will be taken up I hope in the question period which is to follow later this morning.

While speaking about what I call founding spiritual dynamics, you have understood that, if I read Lasallian texts correctly, I was even more attentive to what history can tell us with regard to progression in the Spirit, about which de La Salle remains very discreet, and which is largely a matter of interpretation. This already rejects an understanding of the word "spirituality" as defining a conceptual system more or less elaborated from the writings alone. We can't ensure fidelity to the Founder by drawing from a collection of texts, or by clinging to certain expressions which are powerful and essential, no doubt, but which, separated from the living context which gave them birth, risk becoming ridiculous or turning into slogans.

I can assure you that I took time and expended the necessary effort to prepare this intervention, according to my present capability. But you don't expect me to give you something really new this morning. It's the same field that I've been ploughing for more than thirty years. Let's hope that new ploughmen come forth, because with the Lasallian heritage, as with the treasure in the fables, each generation must re-invent it, re-discover it, appropriate it as its own, not be discovering it intact, like a cassette, after digging in the ground, but by the same action of the ploughman, untingly renewed, in communion.

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