

LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY: OUR HERITAGE (2)

1. The foundation of the Institute, a creation in the experience of the Spirit, by interior men, men of the Spirit.

The first biographers of de La Salle lingered to study the group of schoolmasters at the time when they seemed to be emerging from their initial chaos, and were taking on a certain consistency, before acceding to an identity, or claiming the denomination of "community". A word from the Apocalypse, quite unexpectedly, came out of Blain's pen: "Behold, I shall make all things new. I renew all things through my servant". A formula that sums up the essential in Lasallian history and which the biographers will continue telling. At the end of his life, de La Salle appears to them as a man in whom a creative power was at work. Creative forces, dynamics of renewal, which erupted but not without struggle, in a closed society, a dull, sleeping world, an installed Church.

2. Creative forces present in the founding of the Institute

It is true, and let us repeat it once and for all this morning, because we are more and more aware of it, that there is no question, in any phase of Lasallian activity, of a creation "ex-nihilo". Thanks to numerous and serious works, we now see clearer than ever that the pedagogical, educational, ecclesial and spiritual work of John Baptist de La Salle benefitted from existing sources. It is inscribed in a living context. It develops in a propitious milieu. This play of influences, or reciprocity, of multiple interactions did not prevent the Founder from playing his own role, from pursuing original realisations, from often finding himself alone in his options, from arousing considerable opposition, from instigating change, sometimes in a decisive manner, and after accepting bitter struggles.

At the end of de La Salle's journey, his biographers could take stock of the "novelties" he introduced, thanks to the creative force he knew how to use wisely, with courage and stubbornness.

a) In renewed educational activities:

Creative forces. These can be seen concretely in the history of the youth of the times who were, until then, abandoned. The multiplication of schools and their diversification, the intransigent fight for effective gratuity, the reform of teaching methods, the transformation of the educative relationship all of these changed the situation of the youth in de La Salle's schools. It became possible for these young people to accede to a minimum level of culture, to hope for a professional career, to have a decent human existence, to the beginning of a consciousness of solidarity, to an opening toward the Gospel. Thanks to these creative forces, the means of salvation were put within their reach.

b) In the appearance of new ministries:

Creative forces: they can be seen concretely in the history of the schoolmasters, until that time poorly prepared, poorly motivated and poorly appreciated. The creation of a community, and then of the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, made it possible to strengthen the vocation of the masters, to consolidate their professional formation, to implant their aims and their educational attitudes in the Gospel. The personal attention paid to them by him whom they called their father, his prophetic vision of a renewed Church, similar to that which St. Paul describes, introduced them, little by little, to the living realisation of the importance of their work. Still humble schoolmasters, they are not surprised to hear their founder call them ministers of God, of Jesus Christ and of the Church. These new words rejoin, enlighten and announce the profound change the masters have experienced in the exercise of their profession and the discovery of their identity.

c) In the birth of John Baptist De La Salle to a new Church.

It is first of all in his own personal history that de La Salle experiences these forces of creation, or re-creation, of founding dynamics. "Behold, I shall make all things new". Blain has recourse to this quotation from one of the last passages of the New Testament to characterise the upheaval brought about by de La Salle's final, decisive option. He had just given up his canonry in order to share his existence with the schoolmasters, irrevocably and unconditionally. It is with them and through them that he will go ahead with this work which he now sees as the work of God for him.

Through this decisive option of separation and of commitment, a creative power can be seen in the person of John Baptist de La Salle, leading him to fulfil a prophetic passage: "Be-

hold, I shall make all things new". De La Salle leaves an old, immobile Church to accede to a new one; or at least, having freely consented to the creative force acting in and beyond him, he allows himself to be re-born to a new way of living the Church.

c1): *From an established Church to a Missionary Church.* As a Canon, he spent long hours, sitting in his stall, reciting the Divine Office. Once committed to live with the schoolmasters, he literally dis-installs himself, he leaves a "closed" Church and sets out on an adventure, the adventure of a ministry quite unheard of. From then on he will use all his talents on behalf of children and youth whom he often describes as abandoned and far from salvation. It can be said that in urging him to prefer this venture with the schoolmasters to the reassuring tranquility of his canonry, a creative power made de La Salle emerge from an established Church to a missionary Church.

c2): *From a Church for one self to a Church for the World.* As a Canon, he lived familiarly with classic theology. His assiduous study of it led him to a doctorate. He chooses to risk his future with the schoolmasters; day after day he accompanies them in their field of action; he gets involved in creating a form of priestly ministry which he had not counted on in his plan of life. The Gospel he announces is going to become through him a force that will transform the lives of these men, a power of promotion for the abandoned youth they are serving, a leaven of justice and liberation, a source of upheaval in a closed society.

These "novelties" or innovations will not be introduced, thanks to the creative forces which are pushing de La Salle, except by also bringing about a renewal of his own centres of interest. The doctor of theology will use his talent in favour of catechesis for the children, of the poor and the spiritual formation of his brothers. It seems only just to observe that without fuss and as if it were only natural, de La Salle uses his competence in theology to work out a plan for the Brothers' consecration, their ministry, their commitments their educational responsibilities, their community life, and all this based upon their manner of life. In this living experience, he furnished them food for thought, be it Christological, ecclesiological, pneumatological, eschatological or moral. In short, he took ready-made theology out of the books, to experiment with it in a new ecclesial situation.

Besides all this, we see this priest discovering and putting to good use his talent in the field of pedagogy. From the assiduous sharing in the experience of his companions, he will produce

the *Conduct of Schools*, the *Duties of a Christian*, the *Rules of Politeness*. The creative forces to which he has actively submitted himself have extracted him from a Church occupied with its internal problems only. The new Church, into which they have introduced him, is to be concretely committed to the evangelical transformation of the world.

c3): *From a powerful Church to a serving Church.* As a Canon, his usual companions belonged to the world of ecclesiastics. He shared their culture, their language, their preoccupations. A good number of them, like himself, were related to influential families of the city. After the death of Roland, and in order to help the Sisters of the Infant Jesus, de La Salle used his powerful influence in that particular milieu. This same milieu was surprised and scandalised when he renounced his position as Canon of the Cathedral Chapter. Henceforth what he will share is the humble condition of the schoolmasters, whom the milieu he has left prefer to ignore or to belittle. He will learn to make their daily worries his own as well as their pedagogical activities, their strivings to announce the Gospel to youngsters who are often difficult to handle. With these masters he will build a new school, little by little, and a new style community will appear in the Church. He will not try to found this new work on the support of the old milieu he has left behind. He will write later on in his *Memoir Concerning the Brothers' Habit*, "The Community is presently established and founded on Providence alone". In leaving the Cathedral he tore himself away from a powerful Church to accede to the evangelical and creative force of a frail and servant Church.

c4): *From a clerical Church to a Church of the people of God.* Finally, he gave up being a Canon because he felt the incompatibility of that state with the requirements involved in the assiduous sharing of the daily life of the schoolmasters. Henceforth his usual companions for lodging, for meals and for conversation, will be laymen. He will help them to measure up to the dignity of their condition in the Church. He will show them that, through them, that Church will see a new form of evangelical ministry come alive. With them, he will maintain and defend the formation of a new kind of community whose members are consecrated to God and commit themselves to remain as laymen and to admit none but laymen in their midst. Should we not recognise, that in this small group animated by de La Salle, a creative power has made them pass from the clerical Church to the Church of the People of God?

Bro. Michel SAUVAGE