

LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY: OUR HERITAGE(3)

12 - In the experience of the Spirit

"Behold, I shall make all things new". John Baptist de La Salle was aware that a creative power was acting in him. He was aware of the changes it was bringing about in his own being as in society and in the Church. It seems to me that the quite exceptional importance he gives to the Holy Spirit in his spiritual teachings is closely linked to this creative experience of which he is both the beneficiary and the instrument. I will limit myself to four different leads to guide your reflection on this subject, and in a very simplified form, because to develop these perspectives would take very much time. In the margin I will indicate some references from Lasallian texts.

1. *First lead: Recognise the gift of the Spirit*

We all remember the famous passage where John Baptist recalls his decisive commitment to the adventure of the schools and the establishment of the Brothers' community. He recognises that it was God who guided him, from one commitment to another, with wisdom and gentleness, without forcing his will. God, by His Spirit, detached him little by little from his familiar universe, from his manner of living the Church, to engage him on a path where he would accompany him to create a new world. The Founder will often say to his disciples that their Institute, their particular vocation, is first the work of the Spirit who spreads his gifts among men for the realisation of God's salvation. (Two key texts: MR 201,1, 193,1).

First of all, it is necessary to recognise the gift of the Spirit, and the term recognise takes on numerous spiritual harmonics. To recognise the gift of the Spirit is, of course, to become aware of it day after day, and this celebration in memory of the Spirit does not and will not cease to renew and to actualise this gift. To recognise the gift of the Spirit is to know how to be moved by it in order to give thanks, and here we are orientated towards a spiritual attitude which is fundamentally positive and which can be dynamic when we are tempted to dejection or self complacency because of our insufficiency or our difficulties.

To recognise the gift of the Spirit, is to situate it in the immense and overwhelming action of the Spirit, in the movement of the Spirit, as the

Founder says, which produced the prophets, which presided at the birth of the Church, just as it surveyed the genesis of the universe (two key texts: MD 43,1 - 2,1). There can be no question of turning a nostalgic eye to a marvellous but outdated past. You must recognise the passing of the Spirit in our history today. To recognise the gift of the Spirit is also to put it to work, to use it without fear and with enthusiasm, and here we are committed to spread forth the creativity that the Spirit inspires and sustains in us. (MR 193,2) We should mention here how John Baptist de La Salle knew how to set the Brothers on the road of this creativity. We can feel it in reading the entreaties, not untainted with impatience, which he addresses to Gabriel Drolin. (Letters 14, 8-10 and 16, 6-7).

To recognise the gift of the Spirit is to recognise the Spirit of God Itself as the principle of life and action which is given to us (EMO: 18-19). Here we could add several texts of the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer* and from the Meditations. It is most important to be able to show the Founder as a spiritual author who, under the influence of St. Paul and of St. John, repeatedly calls us to welcome and to serve life, to believe obstinately that the powers of life are once and for all victorious over the powers of death. (MD 45,1).

2. *Second lead: to be available for the gratuitous and unforeseeable action of the Spirit.*

While recalling the story of the change of orientation in his life, de La Salle took pleasure in recognising the unexpected, the unforeseeable, the disconcerting character of the manifestation of the creative power of the Spirit. "I thought nothing about it before". Besides, he was impressed by the fact that the Spirit manifested itself and intervened where he least expected it. It was not the Archbishop who encouraged him to give up his canonicate, but rather, humble laymen.

The Gospel reference that Barré pounded into his consciousness and which he himself repeated to his companions to invite them to abandonment, did not become the word of God for him in the flesh until he felt within him the brutal questioning of the schoolmasters who were completely closed to any kind of dialogue without an existential consistency. We would continue: at the time of the crisis of 1690, it is really thanks to the contract of association that he signs with Vuyart and Drolin that de La Salle is projected once more in his vocation of Founder: at the same time as he pronounces his vow of association, he sets out gain for a new creative action. It will be the same at the time of his doubts in 1710: it is through his Brothers that the Spirit will send him back to finish his work. The first effect of the Spirit of faith: to look upon all things with the eyes of faith. In the light of these powerful expe-

riences, I think that certain spiritual teachings of the Founder take on a very different resonance: the teaching on the spirit of faith first, and the invitation to recognise the presence and the action of the Spirit in people, in situations, in the events of everyday life, and in the history of humanity. Once more, we are invited, not to an attitude of drawing back before what may upset us, but to a spiritual attentiveness to the invitation that the Spirit is addressing to us along the path of renewed fidelity we are living. "Because it is life, personal and collective life, which is the place where God calls, the place of conversion and the place of witness". (J. Rigal: *Le Courage de la Mission*, p. 50).

In the second place, I would like to call your attention a brief moment to a spiritual teaching to which the Founder attaches considerable importance in the *Collection*, in the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer* and in certain meditations: I refer to docility, receptiveness to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit (MF. 99,2 180,3 123, 1-2 L. 129,1 89-3 8-9. *Collection* 118-119 188, III. 186, XI. The expression may seem vague, if not old-fashioned; it may seem risky, subjective or individualistic. Getting a closer look, in the light of the experience of the foundation, shouldn't we see in this Lasallian insistence (which is classical) an essential reminder? The kindness or consideration of the Spirit outdoes all assured systems and shakes up old-fashioned habits; the life of the Spirit reaches out and calls beyond elaborated programmes and accepted conventions; free action of the Spirit is not subject to fixed structures or majority consensus. To speak of the inspiration of the Spirit is to recall the experience of each individual which must be welcomed and listened to because "in each of the Brothers, the Spirit speaks and acts", and renewing creation often begins with the perception and the commitment of a person.

To complete this point, I must mention the importance of spiritual discernment concerning which the Founder has left us solid and clear criteria. (Compare: MR 100 and 118, 132,1-2 and 174,4 167 and 143, 177 and 97).

3. *Third lead: The transcendent strength of the Spirit. Its powerful and creative activity is unfurled in our weakness.*

There is a third, very strong characteristic of Lasallian experience of the Spirit in the Founder's story and in that of the foundation of the Institute. The strength of the Holy Spirit is displayed in human weakness, and the creative force is seen in shaky, often tentative achievements which are sometimes tainted with ambiguity. To speak of the creative force of the Spirit at the beginnings of the Institute, does not imply, according to the Founder, any confident step or steady progress forward. On the contrary, as we know, the Founder had to acknowledge and rely

on the fidelity of the Spirit when in the depths of the many crises which frequently brought the Institute to the edge of collapse.

The Founder's spiritual teaching does not ignore this important dimension of the experience of creation which he himself had lived. When all is said and done, the fact that the strength of the Spirit should be manifest in the weakness of man is, for the Founder, a source, in the first place, of deep assurance, of joy and of interior peace. We can already see this interior joy in Blain's presentation of the decisive option of the Founder. The questioning by the teachers forces him into a choice. Blain then reconstructs the long prayer of discernment to which John Baptist then commits himself. He becomes aware that he can no longer procrastinate; he must now choose between his canonicate and the care of the teachers. He must decide whether to remain on the familiar bank or whether to venture the crossing of the river without really knowing what he will find on the other side, even if he should reach it.

Now whereas he always seems to live in a state of perplexity, here we find him suddenly taken up with an inner but irrepressible joy, the delight of making a surprising discovery: "Since I no longer feel any attraction for the vocation of a Canon, it would seem that the state left me before I left it... This state is no longer for me". While he was pondering over the pros and cons, the Spirit Himself had already carried him on to the other bank, as in the case of the prophet in former times, and for John Baptist it was now merely a matter of walking along that bank.

De La Salle will later explain in the *Collection*, in a text which though at first sight heavy is yet full of finesse: "Yes, God is asking you to be faithful in the present moment; he gives the necessary light for the step he is calling you to make. But His creative power carries you beyond what you thought yourself capable of doing". God's Spirit is greater than our heart: that is de la Salle's experience of the creation of the Institute; it was also the experience of his own spiritual evolution. It is one of the most important themes in his spiritual teaching on fidelity to the Spirit. In his teaching he tirelessly insists on our daring to take on a commitment, since His invincible strength will not fail us, and on our need to retain an interior attitude of poverty since, in ourselves, we are often fearfully weak, lazily shortsighted and frivolously fickle. But the Spirit is our strength, our light and our faithfulness, provided that we know how to pray to him with trust, how to await him with patience, and how to recognise and follow him with docility. As daring, poor and confident men we will be the amazed witnesses to the strength of the Spirit who leads us well beyond ourselves as far as a land, judged from afar to be arid, but in reality thoroughly fertile. That land where the Spirit opens us up to the knowledge and practice of a new wisdom, that of the Beatitudes.

4. *Fourth lead: Living as interior men, as men of the Spirit.*

One of the interior supports of the Institute is interior recollection. Let us call it interiority. To bring his teachers to live in conformity with the purpose of their Institute it was necessary for the Founder to help them become 'interior' men. He considered it a priority to devote himself to his disciples' education in interiority. His writings, especially the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer*, greatly insist on its importance and its conditions. Mental prayer is an 'interior' occupation and, in order to be well founded, it should be "practised in the very depth of the soul, that is to say, in the most intimate part of man's being. (EMO 3 Cf. 26,30 34, 72).

One might be tempted, if not to set interiority and creativity in opposition to each other, at least not to envisage them as progressing together in a single movement. Some of the texts of the Founder suggest such a dichotomy, particularly a certain number of articles from the *Collection* on the "Means of becoming interior", which can be construed as an encouragement to withdraw into oneself and to passivity.

This is not the place for discussing at length texts from another age, shaped to fit the world for which they were written. It seems to be quite right to observe that, taken in its entirety, Lasallian interiority is not opposed to creativity — quite the contrary. Interiority liberates man from undue ties, from worries and superficial concerns. It therefore enables him to devote his energies to what is essential. Interiority focuses man on the basic objectives to be reached; it enables him to better appreciate the means to be used to that end and to launch out into action without squandering his energies on secondary activities. Interiority leads man to deepen the meaning of his action and to measure its value and importance. It makes him dynamic by intensifying his motivations. Interiority makes man sensitive to the richness of life spread out before him in his human surroundings; it induces him to associate his action with that of other people and to adjust his efforts to those of others.

But it especially seems to me that, for de la Salle, interiority and creativity are joined together most profoundly because they are at one and the same time a searching for, a welcoming of and a manifestation of the Spirit. Lasallian interiority is spiritual interiority. The depth of the soul of which he has just spoken, is the bottom of the heart, converted from selfishness and open to love, because it is inhabited and animated by the Spirit of Christ, a spirit of sonship.

Deep within man the Spirit is awareness of the personal love of the Father. It opens up to the love of others, a kind of love which is manifested in works. Deep within man the Spirit is the astonishing experience of salvation. It empowers man to go out and to try to reveal to others this salvation that has overtaken him.

In the depth of the heart, the Spirit is the recognition that strength is found in weakness and that sanctity purifies from sin; it urges man to commit himself resolutely, certain that in his commitment to others the Spirit is also manifested in his weakness, and that mercy will triumph over the forces of evil. Most of all, at the bottom of the heart, the Spirit becomes prayer, crying to God "Abba, Father" and whispering to the heart of man, "You are loved come to the Father. You are called to bear witness to this love. Go out and meet your brothers". The Meditation for the ninth Sunday after Pentecost clearly expresses this unity of spiritual interiority when it says:

"The Holy Spirit that resides in you must penetrate the depth of your souls; it is in them that this Spirit must pray in a very special manner. It is within the soul that this Spirit communicates with it, joins himself to it and gives it to understand what God requires of it in order to be entirely His". (MD 62, 3).

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The Spirit is most important

In concluding this point, I would like to remind you that the experience of Lasallian creativity is inscribed between two events whose symbolic importance seems to me to be very strong at the beginning of this General Chapter.

The first event is that of the departure of almost all of the first companions of de La Salle. From the beginning of his contact with them he had striven to establish some order in the rather inefficient chaos of the little group. However, they simply left him. To make a long story short, they discovered, in Blain's phrase, "that their freedom was too constrained".

John Baptist will ponder this bitter failure in the light of the Gospel of spiritual freedom. Once and for all, he understood that structures, though essential, cannot make up for the lack of vocation nor the absence of an interior assent when it is a question of a vocation and an evangelical project. An institute cannot be founded by imposing readymade structures on its members from without. At this point some young men present themselves to the Founder. They are anxious to "know Jesus Christ Crucified and devote themselves to a ministry in favour of the poor". The Founder will henceforth dedicate himself to changing them into new men, interior men, men of the Spirit. The movement of educational and apostolic creativity and the task of the organisation of the community will be inseparable from his efforts as guide and spiritual teacher.

Inspiration will be the soul of any structures that are set up, while the enthusiasm of the members taking flesh in the structures that issue from their living communion, will find a new strength

in it. From the reality of their own world, the consciousness of their calling and of their mission, men trained in the interior freedom of the Spirit will be able to invent a new way of living as Church and humbly contributing to the evangelical transformation of society.

The second event is a text, the prologue of Chapter II of the Rule. De La Salle added it only in 1718. The newborn community can now, it seems, mark the end of the period of foundation. Brother Bartelemy is Superior General; the Rule has been definitively set down and accepted by all those who were also its authors. As to structures, the Institute seems to be prepared for the long haul, and the Holy See, a few years later, will reinforce its existence by recognising the originality of its charism rather more than by approving the details of its rules.

And there rings out again, almost for the last time, the prophetic voice of the Founder. It resounds as in the beginning of the Rule in a Prologue which does not appear in the text before 1718. The theme is solemn and we all have it engraved deeply in our memories. Even as young novices, we sensed its unique impor-

tance, as if the Founder, on completing his work, cautioned his sons when he passed on to them the (partial) results of this long process of creation.

“Brothers, do not fail to appreciate the creative powers that have been bestowed upon you to exist and to grow. Do not underestimate the forces that will permit you to live as persons consecrated to God, as evangelical servants of the young, and in brotherly communion. Here is the Rule that you will observe since we drew it up together throughout the 40 years of our foundation. And do not forget — it is not this Rule which is the most important thing. What is most important and to which the greatest care should be given in a community, is that all those who are a part of it have the spirit which characterises it; that the novices apply themselves to acquire it; that those who are engaged in it should endeavour above all to preserve and increase it in themselves. For it is this spirit which must give life to all their actions and animate all their conduct”.

Bro. Michel SAUVAGE