

## LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY: OUR HERITAGE (4)

### **The Foundation of the Institute: An Incarnational Dynamism for the "Salvation" of abandoned young people, following Jesus Christ.**

#### **21 - The founding shock of the Institute.**

Each time I read the first point of the Second Meditation for the Time of Retreat (194), I feel, as it were, the shock wave by which the Institute came into being, the creative shock which engendered John Baptist De La Salle in his own vocation, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the creative shock from which he set out on his evangelical journey as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

##### a) *A cultural shock between two worlds.*

We know this text well. It begins with an invitation to the Brothers gathered together on retreat to "consider" clearly — almost clinically, we might say — the concrete situation of forsaken youth; and the early Brothers who were listening to this reading could call to mind the faces of children that they knew and give them their proper names.

"Consider that it is only too common for the working class and the poor to allow their children to live on their own, roaming all over as if they had no home... The results of this condition are regrettable for these unfortunate children have great difficulty when the time arrives for them to go to work..." (MR 194,2).

A creative shock. In John Baptist De La Salle's case, of course, it can be taken as a cultural shock, a harsh confrontation between two worlds which existed side by side in the same city with each unaware of the other because everything kept them apart: the normal channels of human relationships, social status, cultural possibilities. Speaking of John Baptist's father, Maillefer tells us that he had endeavou-

red to give his son "an education suitable to his birth". As a result of his contacts with the masters, De La Salle was suddenly immersed in the reality of an entirely different type of youth in Rheims; he was astonished to find that, for a whole class of children in his city, receiving an education suited to their birth amounted practically to being excluded from even the most modest places of learning, the charity schools. And, from that point, his lucid outlook on the reality of things obliges him to foresee the "distressing consequences" to which this situation will inexorably lead: the children of the working class and the poor are prisoners of the vicious circle in which their family situation and social condition enclose them. This forsaken world is doomed in advance to go on repeating itself indefinitely in the same form.

##### b) *A shock between the world of faith and the world such as it is.*

The first phrase of the second section of this text reminds us, should we have lost sight of it, that we are in meditation. That is to say, for the Founder, that we are in the contemplation of the mystery of the living God, of the saving God. And this word resounds like a shout of victory — life has vanquished death.

"God has the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune by the establishment of the Christian Schools, where the teaching is offered free of charge and entirely for the glory of God". (MTR, p. 50).

Thanks to the intervention of the living God, of the God of Life, of the God of the History of Salvation, here and now, those children can be "saved". They will be fit "to put to work when their parents wish to set them to it". And the point of the meditation ends with a double invitation: to give thanks for the foundation of the Institute which has come into being as the response of the Brothers to God's call; to renew their impetus for the evangelical service of education of youth.

"Thank God that He has had the goodness to call upon you to procure such an important advantage for children. Be faithful and exact to do this without any payment; so you can say with St. Paul: the source of my consolation is to announce the Gospel free of charge, without having it cost anything to those who hear me". (MTR, p. 50).

We do know that, to some Brothers, to the

Institute itself in the course of its long missionary history, similar shocks like the one of its origins have continually imbued it with a new creative force, a renewal of life, an ability to invent new educational structures. The Institute would have disappeared a long time ago had it not renewed itself unceasingly by the acceptance of that frequently disconcerting encounter with new cultures, with new countries, with unpredictable young people. It was challenged in the diverse forms of distress: material, emotional and cultural distress, lack of goods, difficulties arising from school dropouts and unemployment for young men, criminal manipulation by drug pushers and white slavers, distress coming from doubts about the meaning of life, indifference, incredulity, the choking sensation from within bloated societies blinded to any transcendence, or the distress of helplessness in the face of famine or under oppressive regimes.

But the basic message, which is brought home to us here, from both De La Salle's act of foundation and his spiritual teaching, is that this is a question not only of cultural shock but of a clash between the reality of the world and living faith.

The passage I have quoted reminds us that the Institute was born from "the goodness of God". "God has had the godness to remedy so great a misfortune".

The thrust of the Meditations for the Time of Retreat, and more generally the whole spiritual teaching of the Founder invite us here to place ourselves in the heart of the Mystery of Jesus Christ. De La Salle is fond of the word "mystery", enshrined at the very centre of the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer*. And there it is for us to ponder what he means by it.

### c) *Understanding Lasallian Christocentrism in the movement of the founding shock.*

Lasallian spirituality, like that of his days and like any authentic spirituality, is Christocentric. John Baptist ceaselessly invites his Brothers to contemplate Jesus Christ, imitate His virtues, strive to grow in conformity with Him and to dwell in Him, We could quite easily build a kind of synthesis of his spiritual teaching — rich, dense and solid in that respect. However, it seems obvious to me that such a synthesis loses its originality as well as its creative force if it is assembled without taking into account that Lasallian Christocentrism springs

from the founding shock of the Institute. In other words, the Christ that John Baptist de La Salle speaks to us about is an evangelical Christ, emphatically the Christ of the Synoptic Gospels, of St. Paul and St. John. But his contemplation of Him is continually pierced through by what he has discovered, and what he still discovers in his present world. For if the salvation of God was accomplished once and for all through the Incarnation and in the Life, Ministry, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, if the salvation is made available by the Spirit today and within the Church, he cannot but note that for young people, those that he meets each day, all this reality of faith, the reality of the other world which animates the Brothers also, appears to be distant, unattainable, unreal.

In their reality, the world, such as it is, mocks and damages their faith. Hence, one can doubtless see that, feeling threatened, faith will shrink into itself, the contemplation of Christ tends to detach itself from a human experience which seems to contradict it, and prayer shuts itself in, even when it stands in wonder before God's mystery. One could also see how, in a more or less conscious way, a faith thought to be obsolete and incapable of transmission might be shunted aside, placed between brackets, while the importance of positive, concrete education for the material progress of youth is clearly seen.

De La Salle's attitude, such as I see it, both in his journey of foundation and in the dynamism of his spiritual teaching on the Mystery of Jesus Christ, accepts neither of these points of view. For the Founder, it is the silent work of the Spirit in their hearts that has made himself and his Brothers sensitive to that spiritual and cultural chasm that separates the young children they know from that which is proclaimed by the faith which is theirs. The first effect of the spirit of faith is an entire change in the way one looks on life — to see everything through the eyes of faith. The clinical sharpness of the analysis of the distressful situation of youth cannot lead to despair because the Spirit causes the Brothers to recognize in those young people the presence of Jesus Christ Himself, an invisible, tenuous but hopeful presence. Their faith is challenged; it is also stirred by the power of the Resurrection. In that respect, one must read once again the many lasallian texts that invite us to "recognize Jesus Christ beneath the tattered clothing of child-

ren", and calls upon us to respect in those forsaken youngsters the dignity of the children of God.

At the same time, out of this contemplation of a reality both enlightened and challenged by faith, there wells up in the heart of the Brother the certainty of being called by God to those young people, just as they are. What it comes to mean is that the founding shock is that of a clash between two worlds while at the same time it is a shock produced in their inner selves by the bursting into flame, in the heart of the Brother, of a spark from the heart of God. "That is the reason why God kindles a light in those called to announce His word to children to enlighten them by making the glory of God known to them". (MTR, p. 47) 193.I.

d) *The founding shock of the Institute is produced in the heart of the living God.*

It is necessary to go beyond, or rather to return to the very origin of the founding shock. According to De La Salle, it appears as a prolongation or manifestation in the history of mankind, of the "shock" which God felt in His love for men.

Here we should read again the extraordinary text of Med. 201. In fact, it repeats the message of St. John:

"You must imitate God himself to some extent, for He so loved the souls He created that when He saw them involved in sin and unable to free themselves, His zeal and desire for their salvation led Him to send His own Son to rescue them from their miserable condition. This is what made Jesus Christ say that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that whoever believes in Him may not die, but may have eternal life". (MTR, p. 76) 201.

It seems to me that it is from this point that everything starts, or rather that it is here that the impulse of the educational service to the young must ceaselessly reinforce its dynamism and renew its self confidence. That which founded the Institute following the lived experience of John Baptist de La Salle, that which still founds it anew each day in its sure and true bursting forth, is the love of God in Jesus Christ, which has its beginnings in Trinitarian Love.

But we are very far from the divine impassivity to which the abstract treatises of theodicy

coolly refer; the kind of love of which we speak has nothing in common with the static contentment jealously shared only by the Three (Persons) which some meditations on the Trinity sometimes seem to evoke. For the Trinity has been revealed to us only by the Son who lived amongst men. And this mission of the Son, as well as the sending of the Spirit, is seen by the Founder as caused by the unbearable suffering of God in presence of human distress. When all is said and done, it is the Cross of Christ that manifests not only what is God's love for men, but Love such as it is lived within the Trinity, that is to say, at the very fountain of all love. A lasallian spiritual vision, formulated in the 17th century, but to which many present-day theological studies on the sufferings of God have given a renewed actuality, a modern resonance.

**22 - The founding shock of the Institute: the Brother minister of Jesus-Christ.**

I would willingly consider this contemplation of love in the heart of a God open to human distress, in Mental Prayer and Lasallian Spirituality, as the equivalent of the "foundation" in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Whatever the case, from this fundamental contemplation of the heart of God, the spiritual and apostolic thrust will spring up or gush forth from the Brother's heart by taking on very realistic form in the exercise of his humble ministry. The text of our meditation goes on as follows:

See what God and Jesus Christ have done to restore souls to the grace they have lost. What must you not do for them in your ministry if you have a zeal for their salvation". (MTR, p. 76).

Once again, let us note, if the Founder immediately sends his disciples back to the reality of their daily occupations, or rather to the effective accompaniment of the children entrusted to them, it is by opening them up to the inventive creativity that he brings them back to their activities. "What must you not do for them in your ministry". The true, patent, unavoidable realities for the Brother are those of the mystery of God's love and of the reality of the young just as they are. From the tension between the two, and because the Brother already belongs to both worlds, there continually springs forth the "ministry" of the Br-

other, but seen as a capacity for creativity and inventiveness. "What must you not do?": You must never cease to begin again.

a) *Christocentrism of the ministry of Jesus-Christ*

What is important, I think, is to stress the fact that it is here that the real Christocentrism presented by John Baptist de La Salle to his disciples finds its roots as a deep spiritual dynamism. Such Christocentrism is that of a "minister of Jesus Christ", for "what God and Jesus Christ have done", once for all and for the whole of mankind, you must do it again, you must actualize it here and now, for the portion of humanity that has been entrusted to you.

You are the ministers of Jesus Christ for them. That means you have constantly to re-enter into the movement of the Mystery of Jesus Christ such as it unfolded, and such as it is presented, for example, in the Christological hymn of the Epistle to the Philippians. Therefore it is not a matter of imitating the actions of Jesus Christ, or of a union with Jesus Christ seen as something static and individualistic. "As you represent Jesus Christ for the children confided to your care, you must become one with Him, enter into His views, His inten-

tions and, by the power of the Spirit given to you, reproduce today the very movement of His mystery.

b) *The mystery and ministry of Christ.*

What appears to me as essential and original, difficult to express and still more difficult to live — though it deals with a kind of dynamism to be renewed unceasingly — is the fact that John Baptist de La Salle does not dissociate the interior, mystical dynamism of the mystery from its very concrete, often prosaic, actualization in the exercise of the educational ministry of the Brother. Besides, one must indeed be conscious of the constant interaction between the exercise of ministry and the personal growth of the Brother in the mystery.

"Undoubtedly, we are familiar with the dynamism which goes from the mystery to the ministry: "If you want to be successful in your ministry, often give yourself over to the Spirit of Jesus Christ". But one must not fail to recognize a mutual dynamism: if you want to grow in Jesus Christ become more and more God's sons in the Spirit, dedicate yourselves to your everyday tasks; they will enlighten you, set you free and lead you on.

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