

DE LA SALLE, MORALIST

St. John Baptist De La Salle lived during what is generally accepted as the high point in French literary culture. This age was also a period in which France contributed significantly to the European philosophical climate.

Prominent among the many aspects of this culture scene of the Grand Siècle was a highly developed *moralism*: i.e. pre-occupation with right conduct (even if the criteria by which *right* was determined were not necessarily Christian, and even when its exponents did not always embody in their own lives the moral wisdom they taught...).

I recall here the names of the following outstanding religious figures whose lives in some part co-incided with the life-span of our Founder: Pascal 1623-62; Bossuet 1627-1704; Fénelon 1651-1715.

Descartes 1596-1650 dominated the philosophical scene, and, to a lesser extent, the now largely forgotten Malebranche 1635-1715 who applied the Cartesian system to theology.

More directly relevant here are the names of:

La Rochefoucauld 1613-80; his *Maximes* 1664; La Fontaine 1621-95; his *Fables* between 1668-1694; La Bruyère 1645-96; his *Caractères* 1688, 1696'

All these writers were noted and admired moralists, their works noted above were all published within the formative period of our Founder's life.

The moralism of De La Salle's writings:

There is good internal evidence for considering St. John Baptist De La Salle as a moralist or, at least, to show that a preoccupation with the moral aspect of conduct is a characteristic of his mentality. In his writings designed and addressed almost exclusively to his Brothers, this moral preoccupation shows itself in his concentration upon religious life lived out consistently with its basic principles.

It would be a subject for literary study to show e.g. from his *Meditations* how our Saint sometimes reads very much like one or other of the great contemporary moralists noted earlier. E.g. in his Meditation No. 73 (Battersby's edition, 1953): "We Must Not Expect God To Work Miracles Just To Please Us", especially point 2; again, No. 76: "There Are In Religious Communities Many Who, Although They Have Left The World, Have Not Lost Its Spirit", point 2; and earlier, No. 15: "Of The Three Classes Of Religious Who Obey Without Having The Merit Of Blind Obedience", point 1

My thesis is that in those of his writings designed especially for the Brothers considered as religious, our Founder's principal preoccupations and inspiration are those of a (Christian) moralist for whom the primary and essential notions for consideration are

good and evil conduct and moral values, sin and grace, spiritual progress and spiritual perfection.

The Collection especially:

Let me illustrate my view simply from the *Collection*, using Brother Clair Battersby's edition (1965 printing).

In the Preface we read:

"It is of the utmost importance in a community that the Superiors endeavour, in all things, and with all possible vigilance, to foster the exact observance of such things as are essential and best calculated to preserve the distinctive spirit, while preventing laxity from creeping in" P. 65.

Then there is a consideration of "The Obligation of the Vows" "The vows oblige the Brothers to work together in the Society... They cannot leave the Society... without violating the vows and committing a mortal sin and a sacrilege" P. 69.

What is meant essentially to characterise the Brothers of the Institute is the spirit of faith; hence the "Explanation of the Spirit of our Institute"; here, significantly as illustrating De La Salle's own mentality, *faith*, which is an intellectual virtue, *is discussed exclusively in terms of how it motivates and actuates conduct*.

"The true Christian is such because he is guided by, and his actions are performed with, views and motives of faith" P. 93. And again: "The Brothers shall always have in mind the orders and will of God... by which they shall be careful to regulate their conduct" P. 94.

While Holy Scripture is presented as affording the spiritual sustenance for animating a life of lived faith, our Founder has made what is perhaps one of his more personal contributions to spirituality by providing an arsenal of scriptural texts accommodated to many specific occasions in the Brother's daily life. It will be noted that this accommodation is nearly always *in a moralistic sense*.

This same moral pre-occupation is seen even more particularly in various *Directories and schemas for self-examination which constitute so large a part of the Collection*.

This same preoccupation goes through the rest of the *Collection*: e.g. under the heading "Means of Performing Our Actions Well", we are told that "if we wish to perform our actions well, with the perfection that God requires of us, we should be particularly careful *not to perform any of them thoughtlessly or with precipitation*" P. 114; and following on this, several specific situations of the Brother's day are envisaged and prescribed for.

Similarly, under the heading of "Principal Virtues", we read concerning "Faith": "Let your first care be *to act by faith* and not by caprice, inclination or whim" P. 124.

Even the vagaries of the wandering mind are to be countered: "Be careful never to apply *your mind* to anything through mere curiosity, or to aim solely at intellectual gratification, but *apply it only to those things which befit your profession*" P. 127.

Then and now: Reconciliation or Rejection?

It is true that some of the detailed moral prescriptions and programmes enshrined in the *Collection* had lapsed before any one now living as a Brother can remember: e.g. "Directions for Giving an Account of

One's Conscience" PP. 79-82; others had never been effectively operative: e.g. "Directory on which each Brother should give an Account of his Conduct" *Cahier Lasallien* 15, 1963 PP. 122-29; or the "Directory which Brothers should Follow when Travelling" same PP. 130-32.

On the other hand, it is remarkable how vigorous some other prescriptions remained among us, at least in some parts of the world, until the early 1960's; and how deeply they had influenced our lives: e.g. "Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer" Battersby PP. 72-77; and the "Passages of Scripture which may Help the Brothers to Perform their Actions through a Spirit of Faith" PP. 101-106. These were the more influential because many of us had learnt them by heart during our novitiate days.

The strength of this outlook:

The spirituality of the *Collection* (as also of the Meditations for Sunday and Feasts) was a great source of our inspiration and strength and that, even if some of its prescriptions seem excessively moralistic, the general doctrine was sound.

Yet, now there seems to be presumption that not only are the detailed and moralistic prescriptions obviously out-moded, but more; that the general spirituality of which such prescriptions are at the worst merely an exaggeratedly emphatic utterance, is completely abrogated.

I put the question: how, in view of the insistence Vatican II places on the charism of the Founder, can any wholesale abandonment of a major part of St. De La Salle's spiritual legacy be regarded as valid and legitimate?

If distinction is to be made between rejection (or, at least, effective consignment to oblivion) and literal acceptance and observance, on what principles will such distinction be made?

Proposed solution:

If the Founder's charism is valid, then his express spiritual teaching may be presumed to be valid. Vatican II reminds us: "Therefore let their Founder's spirit and the special aims as well as their sound traditions — all of which make up the patrimony of each institute — be faithfully held in honour" *Perfectae Caritatis* art. 2b.

De La Salle clearly intended his Brothers to be *religious*. In the *Collection* (as in the *Rule* and the *Meditations*) there is a detailed working out of that basic intention. Such a programme is surely mandatory upon us, demanding at least our serious consideration, both as communities and as individuals.

Religious institutes — so it seems to me from the history of the past two decades — are not — immune from the danger of "revisionism" i.e. of re-reading and re-writing their history in the light of currently acceptable ideologies.

The authority of Chapters and of Superiors to interpret the mind of the Founder derives from their essential conformity to that mind; and it could be that sometimes this conformity may have to be demonstrated rather than simply presumed.

The relevance of this consideration of *St. De La Salle as a moralist* is that it may help us more readily to appreciate the special nature of our vocation as teaching religious or, if you wish, as religious educators.

If it should happen that the ascetical doctrine of our Founder as we find it in the *Collection*, seems to run counter to much of what is currently promoted as "spirituality", this might be seen a further indication of its validity' "The pursuit of perfection to which institutes devote themselves cannot consist only in certain adaptations to be carried out in relation to the changing circumstances of the world; they must instead assist the fruitful re-discovery of the means essential for leading a life completely permeated with love of God and man" Paul VI *Evangelica Testificatio* 1970 art. 37.

And again, "Fidelity in the exigencies of certain fundamental options is the touchstone of authenticity in religious life" art. 12. emphasis added.

"... it must be possible to pass from external activity to the demand of the common life, taking care to ensure full effectiveness to the elements of the strictly religious life" art. 26 emphasis added.

The same insistent recall of basic essential practices may be found in the more recent Roman document: *Essential Elements of the Religious life* (1983), especially in articles 20 and 21.

"The local community, as the place where religious life is primarily lived, has to be organized in a way which makes religious values clear"; and there follow specific directives which embrace the ordinary recurring circumstances of such life on a daily, weekly and annual cycle".

Conclusion:

I consider that the presentation of the thought of St. John Baptist De La Salle over the past two decades has been to some degree distorted; the contemporary presentation is as much subject to bias of current assumptions as that of the eighteenth and nineteenth century interpreters of his thought, who have been severely criticised because they have read their own thought and values into the minds of the Founder. Physician heal thyself!

In particular, what seems to me to have been neglected is the *strong moral/ascetical element* of our Founder's views on *religious life*. This, naturally enough, does not come through so strongly in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* (because of their concentration on the school apostolate). What compounds the problem is these *Retreat Meditations* have been for some years now treated as though they constituted a *canon within the canon* of our Founder's writings.

To restore a balance it would be helpful to view exactly those elements of his thought which are least congenial to contemporary assumption; many of which are to be found especially in the *Collection* which was expressly designed by our holy Founder to be a kind of *handbook* - enchiridion - of spirituality - for his Brothers.

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