

## THE BROTHERHOOD OF SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE (1)

What can a human being add to the Gospel? Nothing? St. Paul affirms: "In my own flesh, I make up for what is lacking in the sufferings of Jesus Christ" (Col. 1, 24). What could possibly be lacking there?

Perhaps, by this expression, Saint Paul is trying to divide the human act into two possible aspects: the first, a situational one which locates Jesus in the history and milieu of man and which through his resurrection creates that space of absolute and vital possibility. But this first aspect is occupied by the being of the God man. The second aspect is occupied by the existence of created man which unceasingly explores the area where human space exists and he contemplates it from his concrete historical situation. But man perceives this space as lacking something fundamental which he has not yet come to define. Man must try to join these two aspects. Of course, the human aspect produces secular fruit. When man explores it, he perceives the lack of unity and a kind of alienation from his natural destiny. Therefore, the human horizon becomes sterile if it does not make contact with the fruitful horizon of the God man.

Thus is explained the subsidiary redemptive action done by man and which is easily understood as an explicit intention throughout the entire course of the history of humanity. There is no epoch in history which does not consider this redemptive task as a vital and inevitable commitment for that time. Thus there are the geniuses, the heroes, and especially the saints who most explicitly wish to fulfill that part of redemption which they are called upon to do. That is what any person can add to the Gospel: "to do what he has to do".

When John Baptist de La Salle comes forth as a protagonist in the seventeenth century, to propose by his way of living, thinking, and acting, a new solution to the ever present human misery, he detected a need and to fill that need. In doing so, John Baptist de La Salle was doing what he had to do!

The reality was this: the needy child had no one to help him or to appreciate him. Who in the evangelical sense is his BROTHER? His parents cannot take care of him for they are poor artisans and laborers who must spend a good part of the day in seeking their daily food; little time remains for the spiritual welfare of their children. What can their blood brothers do for them? What can their peers do for them, let alone those of a different social class?

There is another reality and with which the coredeemptive activity of St. La Salle is going to meet. The situation in France is no different from the life in Spain, Portugal, or on the Italian peninsula. Soon La Salle sets into motion an ecumenical movement interested in the underprivileged children of the world. For this the army of "white rabats" are repeatedly called to the four corners of the world. La Salle is the precursor and protagonist of a movement which if it has continued on until our own day, is because its substance is nourished on human necessity. This is what keeps the Lasallian world living in perpetual youth. To be otherwise would have spelled the death of an organism which could no longer operate. On its tomb would have arisen another response!

But how did La Salle give this group the strength they needed to survive up to our present day?

Among the various realities which present themselves as possibilities, we will take this one into account: La Salle saw as the strength of his group the possibility of a permanent *Brotherhood*. If there is *Brotherhood*, there is a redemptive historical strength. It is must be lived in a concrete environment and for La Salle this concrete environment is the *Community*. The *Community* is the place of *Brotherhood*.

Let us take this last sentence as a declaration of principle and let us treat it, in the Lasallian spirit, carefully probing what it says, without weakening anything, without opportunist, convenient or triumphal accommodations. It is really a question of a principle upon which we must begin. Today's man meets with today's Lasallian and wished to know before all else: "Who are you? and then, where do you come from? and what were you before? And thus we keep on going back until we come to the question: What were you originally? and then finally, How much of that past do you still hold on to today?

When you are beside a river, the question immediately arises: where does this river come from? Then there will follow a lesson of how things in our world our constituted, power going back to its source, always following its banks.

Then a singular calm will be experienced: It begins here! Here starts all that follows, all along the way, ever increasing, until it arrives at the sea...!

This question as a principle can be posed in various ways.

We can do this by interpreting the meaning of the word *Community*. Not so much what it means to us, men living on the threshold of the twenty-first century. We have to find out what it meant for La Salle. From the strength of the *Community* the possible strength of *Fraternity* is derived. If our exploration brings us to the evident proof that *Community* is *Fraternity*, the conclusion of our brief exegesis is clear: *Fraternity* exists only to the extent that *Community* exists. This leads us to a significant Lasallian corollary: La Salle's intuition of *Community* travelled along the current of the river of time and of life, applicable in his time only as a concrete, religious *Community*, and now applied by extension to what is called an educative *Community*. It is a *Community* which comprises such diverse atmospheres as that of the father of a Lasallian family and his conjugal and family *Community*, and of the Lasallian student and his *Fraternal Community*, of the Lasallian teacher and his professional *Community*, and of the former Lasallian student and his social *Community*, and of the Lasallian employee and his working *Community*... This concept, narrow at its starting point, already

reaches an ecumenical breadth, until it reaches a universal *Brotherhood*.

I do not believe that one can object that these premises do not lead to this conclusion. Or what is the same: La Salle never contemplated nor did he intuit what we now obtain as a projection of his teaching under such various aspects. How do we answer this?

Words have a life of their own. Their beginning is in a stammering existence which qualify equally stammering actions: we must recall that action precedes language. Born within a precise place and determined historical time, words have special connotations in their meaning and projection. Then comes their time of full maturity, but a maturity full of the action which gave them their origin and which was evolving towards the development which tried to encompass more than it did at its inception. This is logical. What historical movement, whether ideological, political, or religious... lives on as it was at its beginning? And their founders are considered as heroes who never thought to raise their primordial idea to what it is today.

We have failed to advance one most important idea: the *Community* is not made up only by men and women who have come together of their own free will. There is no community if the God Abraham, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not present.

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