

THE BROTHERHOOD OF SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE (2)

Now we can explore what *Community* is for La Salle. La Salle does not give definitions. He seeks God in the happenings where he finds the manifestation of the Spirit according to which he allows himself to be led. His meditations are where he shows his particular way of thinking, allowing us to see two powerful points which illuminate and at the same time explain his thinking: his meditation on Holy Scripture and his experience in dealing with his *Brothers*. These two points make up the strength of his theology of *Community*. Two lines converging at the omega point: Christ in the person of the *Brother*.

The *Community* is the "place where God gathers together those whom He has chosen as His own (6.1).¹ La Salle affirms in the same text: "If we leave this sanctuary it must be only because God so wills it, because we are called upon to go and preserve the life of Christ in the hearts of those whom we have to instruct" (Ibid). In a religious *Community*, you are in a house where prayer should be your chief occupation. The spirit of God will dwell therein, and God will shower His blessings thereon, only in so far as it is a place of prayer. As soon as you lose the spirit of prayer, and a love for this holy exercise, God will cease to look favorably upon you, but will consider you rather as one unworthy of your employment, which is really His own work, and as one who is turning His house into a den of thieves (62.1). This spirit of prayer is manifested in the practice of two virtues: obedience and the union of hearts (charity) in view of "helping one another to be of God" (113.2; cfr. 65). La Salle asks with exquisite delicacy: "Are you at one with your *Brothers*? Do you speak to them and treat them with love? Do you not hold any ill feelings or grudges? (Id.). The Founder at this time holds up as a model the early *Community* which Luke tells of in the Acts of the Apostles (4,32). La Salle does not create a utopian illusion. He knows full well that perhaps there are those who joyfully commit themselves at first, something like newly-weds, but, how many remain faithful until they end? La Salle points out the reason for the desertion: one is that a person has failed to learn how to pray and another is the failure of being careful about the observance of the Rules. He says with a calm realism "As there are few in religious houses who acquit themselves perfectly of this double duty, there are many who have not the graces necessary to persevere and to preserve the spirit of their state, and who therefore belong merely to the body of the *Community*, and whom

it is necessary to cut off as dead members, as being a source of corruption for the others" (72.1). Is this not the situation, unfortunately, in human groups: between husband and wife, family members, working groups, school *Communities*? If there is a lack of prayer and if there is infidelity to common norms, there is no fundamental fidelity. The richness of the group lies in persons. It is the Spirit of Jesus Christ who animates the human spirit. Each *Community* ought to be a gathering of those men and women animated by the Spirit of Jesus who make up the Church of Jesus Christ.

We have already given some of the elements which are the means which must be always present in a *Community* in order to further the *Brotherhood*, prayer, mutual love, and perseverance. Let us proceed a bit farther with a deepening of this idea. It is clear that this spirit in community requires a special type of "living member". La Salle makes an allusion to this in referring to obedience as the foundation of *Communities* and if it is lacking "they soon find themselves in ruin" (7.2). The practice of this virtue establishes "...order, union, peace, tranquility" (Id.) What happens in a human group when there is no hierarchy? Is horizontalism possible? It is obvious that new modes of authority-obedience have been appearing, but the binomial authority-obedience of whatever shade is a social fact which is not limited to the religious life. La Salle sees the absence of authority and a lack of obedience in a *Community* as "the abomination of desolation in the holy place" (15.3).

There is another way of posing the opening question. It would be a question of capturing from the thought of La Salle what would be the prototype of *Brotherhood* which our religious congregation and our civil society need. We are within the same schema: we run down the road along the river, with rapid steps, very rapid ones, among which there are too many questions to be asked. Still, we profit also by the successes which we have achieved up to this time: 1) La Salle wrote for the *Brothers* of today; 2) La Salle's thoughts on *Brotherhood* are implicitly found in his writings on the *Community*; 3) the doctrine on *Brotherhood* transcends the religious *Community* of consecrated *Brothers* and embraces whatever type of human *Community* which is searching for the installation of the kingdom of God.

The force of a group is shown, the dynamic society tells us, in the interdependence of its members in view of a common destiny. If those bonds which unite the members with one another are strong, the group will be perceived as indestructible; difficulties are obstacles which are to be overcome, and never obstacles which are unbreakable barriers. Crises invigorate! If the *Community* of *Brothers* has its purpose clearly in view, if the bonds which unite the members are sufficiently strong, the *Brother's Community* will have the strength to continue on permanently.

One has to be a fighter in order to be considered a member of a Lasallian *Brotherhood*. The person as an individual is difficult and the human environment is not easily overcome. Misunderstandings spring up spontaneously; it is not difficult to recognize the fact that there is something in man which cannot be contain-

ned. Man has a weak nature from his origin; this has caused disorder at every level of man's life. How much it costs a new order to succeed! The *Brother* is asked to show patience which is a powerful reconciling force. "There are many religious who wish to see miracles and wonders in their Brothers, in the sense that they would like to have to suffer nothing from them, which is a thing quite impossible... Do not, therefore, be so lacking in sense, so unreasonable and so unchristian as to pretend that you should not have to suffer anything from your Brothers". (73.2). In a human group there are all types of personalities. "... one will have a capricious temper, another will be combative, one will be too obliging, another will speak his mind too freely; others will be too reserved, or dissimulating or critical".

To allow the Founder to speak on this theme is somewhat of a delight. "Some perchance will say: 'I do not mind suffering such a thing from my Brother, but as for this other matter, I cannot bear it;' ... Think well on this. If you fancy you can live in *Community* without supporting the defects of your Brothers, you are mistaken," (74.2). He speaks of burdens to be borne which are the defects of others (73.3); he recommends good example "because the *Brothers* continually observe you" (69, 2; cfr. 180, 1), but one should not act out of human respect; the pharisees and Herodians praised Jesus Christ because he taught "without human respect" and La Salle adds sententiously: "Those who live in *Community* have special reasons for imitating Our Lord in this respect" (75, 1; cfr. Mat. 22, 15).

La Salle misses no opportunity in the daily life of a *Brother* to put him on guard against possible lapses, and apart from pointing out the danger, he recommends the remedy: to rise above one's evil inclinations there is no better remedy than retirement and prayer which "are the means which you can use to overcome your inclination to evil and to consecrate yourself to God without reserve". (161, 1); ... in order to fully possess the spirit proper to your state and in order to persevere in it, nothing contributes so much as obedience which gives the soul solidarity and constancy (12, 3; cfr. 7, 2; 89, 1). "Obedience is the most necessary and principal virtue... for all who live in *Community*" (Col 44)² Obedience as a "virtue by which one submits his will and judgement to a man as being the representative of God" (id). Who obeys whom and why in the family, school, political *Community*? Within guarded proportions, there are serious reasons for thinking about revising those fundamental spiritual attitudes which will contribute much in creating harmony within the human group... to make others more aware that you are risen with Christ and aspire to lead a new life for a Brother ought "to order his conversions well, seeing to it that they are holy and agreeable to God" (30, 1). "As the disciples of Emmaus, do you leave these conversations, burning with divine love, better instructed in your duties, and encouraged

to acquit yourself more competently thereof? (Id; cfr. Mat. 24, 32).

So much could be said about human conversation! One modern writer claims that more people are killed by words than by bullets. How much the human community would gain by guarding its words! When a society goes astray, the first thing to be done to reform it is to control the tongue. The care which La Salle took in this matter is evident on many occasions. Thus he offers the *Brothers* an "exhaustive catalogue of topics for conversation during recreation time". Whose purpose was to preserve the *Brothers* from the corruption of their day: (Col. 59); he recommends how the Brothers can become interior and he prescribes the following necessary privations: 1) from human conversations; 2) from useless words (Col 109). Why should we deprive ourselves of human conversations? Because they "drain the soul of the spirit of God", and if anyone speaks, "let him speak the words of God" (Col. 116). La Salle, knowing the weakness of human nature and the words of St. James: "if anyone fails not in words, the same is a perfect man" (3,2), insists upon silence as a virtue which brings one close to God and withdraws one from the world (16,2). What a surprising thing it is, says La Salle "it is in solitude and silence that one learns to speak well" (135.1). Going into the least details, he asks the *Brothers* "Do you want your students to be silent? Then keep silent yourself" (33,2).

What possibility exists for today's society to observe a measured discipline, in the way required, which is going to entail the control of words? There can be no possibility of Brotherhood in a society where words cease to have their proper significance. The word is the house of the person, but if this house is invaded by undesirable tenants, what hope is there for living a fruitful *Fraternal* life if there is not peace within it?

Conclusion

La Salle shows himself as a bulwark of *Brotherhood*.

For La Salle the consideration of *Brotherhood* is closely linked with the idea of *Community*. Whoever says *BROTHERHOOD*, says *Community*; whoever says *Community*, says *Brotherhood*.

La Salle, finally, traces a rather severe sketch of the *Brother* who lives in *Brotherhood*, a profile which applies to every other person who aspires to a universal *Brotherhood*.

If La Salle was able to add something to the Gospel: he did what he had to do!

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¹ Saint John Baptist De La Salle, *Meditations*, London, 1970.

² *Collection of Short Treatises*, Paris, 1939.