

# ★ *lasalliana*

15 - 3 – A - 63

## THE USE OF HYMNS

### IN BROTHERS' SCHOOLS

It is a verifiable fact La Salle introduced the singing of hymns into his schools. Cahier Lasallien No. 22 (CL22) contains the hymns that were collected for this purpose and which were approved in 1703. However, on the basis of these facts some rather fanciful theories have been built which serious research does not support. We thought it would be a good idea to straighten a few things out.

#### The use of hymns in connection with catechism.

To begin with, some information would be useful about when catechism was taught and how long the lessons lasted on various days. On ordinary school days, catechism was taught at the end of the day, at 4 o'clock, except during the winter period. In winter, it was moved forward by half an hour. During La Salle's lifetime, the "school winter period", if we can call it that, lasted from November 15th to January 15th. Then, about 1720, the Conduct extended this period by two weeks at either end. Lessons lasted half an hour.

Other days included half-day holidays when catechism was taught last thing in the morning and lasted half an hour.

When the whole of the following day was a holiday, catechism the day before lasted an hour, with the first half hour given over to the study of the "principal mysteries".

On Sundays and big feasts days, catechism lasted an hour and a half, the first half hour once again given over to the "principal mysteries".

#### When did hymn singing take place?

There is a special kind of hymn clearly indicated for the purpose "which must be sung before catechism on each *weekday*." There is one per day except Sunday (in 1703). This gap was filled in the 1714 edition. Some readers, basing themselves on a somewhat hurried perusal of the text, have attributed certain characteristics to the whole body of hymns and which, in reality, applied only to the first six or seven.

The *first occasion* when hymns are to be sung is clearly indicated: it is "to ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit"; and the first group of hymns is designed to serve this purpose.

The second occasion when a hymn is to be sung is not immediately after the catechism lesson, but after the evening prayer which follows the catechism lesson. This practice is already mentioned in the "Exercices of Piety" approved in 1697. It is included in the "Conduct of Schools" of 1706, and

is still to be found in the 1720 edition. It is also to be found in the Rule of 1726 (Ch. 29; art. 26). According to the Conduct, this hymn can be considered as a recessional one. It is limited to about six verses. Moreover, in the printed text, the groups of six verses are usually separated by typographical embellishments.

These facts cannot justify a point of view which would consider these hymns as a sort of sung meditation, serving to outline the main theme of the catechism lesson which was to follow. To believe this to be the case would be to confuse our own personal practices with what actually used to happen in the days of St. La Salle.

Singing a hymn at the end, after evening prayer, served to ensure that the pupils left the premises in an atmosphere of recollection, even a little relaxed, but also with some good thoughts like "what Christians must believe in order to be saved", as the introduction to the second group of 30 hymns tells us.

Later, there was introduced the practice of singing the "hymn of the week" in full, just before the extended Sunday catechism lesson. This is mentioned in the 1760 edition. From the documents at present available we are unable to discover exactly when this practice was introduced, but it was after 1726. We should perhaps mention that the expression "hymn of the week" implies that there was not a different hymn each day, or that different groups of six verses were used, and this was enough to ensure variety.

#### What were De La Salle's motives?

De La Salle has not given any clear explanation of why he thinks hymns ought to be used. The 1706 edition of the Conduct has a chapter heading "Of Hymns"; but that is all: there is no actual chapter. Elsewhere, one finds that the final hymn has been made part of the leaving school ritual.

De La Salle, however, is convinced that songs can be effective. He says in the "Rules of Politeness" (CL. 19, p. 150): "The words of a song have a much greater impact on the mind than words on their own." This is a recognition of the spellbinding effect of music. Why else would he have used it? It was also to follow a recommendation of St. Paul who, as the Founder points out, "tells us quite clearly on two different occasions in his Epistles that what Christians should sing are psalms, hymns and spiritual canticles." (Ibid. p. 150). Hymns, in their own way, enrich one's life as a Christian. For once, De La Salle refers to pleasure (very respectable pleasure, of course) as a motive for using hymn singing: "It should also be a source of *great pleasure* and enjoyment for Christians to bless and praise often the God of their hearts." (Ibid). This affective aspect is important for De La Salle: "Christians should sing (these hymns) from the bottom of their hearts and with affection, because they express praise for God." In the light of these words, it is hardly surprising to find De La Salle taking the trouble to collect here and there a certain number of hymns "for use in the Christian schools."

## St. John Baptist de La Salle's choice of hymns

To speak simply of "St. John Baptist de La Salle's hymns" could lead to possible misunderstanding and give the impression that De La Salle composed these hymns himself. For example, to assert, as is done in issue 14 of *Lasalliana*, that "De La Salle spent much of his free time composing lyrics for songs which fitted in with what his teachers taught in their religion lesson during the course of the year" is to be excessively generous. The present state of research into these hymns does not in any way support such a confident assertion. We are still trying to discover the origin of the texts used by De La Salle.

### Where do the texts used by De La Salle in school come from?

About 1986, I intensified my research into texts which could have been of interest to De La Salle when he was preparing his 1703 collection of hymns. At the same time, I tried to find the musical scores used in the singing of these hymns. My work continues in both these areas when time permits.

However, I have now reached a point in my research where I can say with certainty where 24 out of the 30 hymns of the first long series (CL. 22) come from: their origin is quite clear, and De La Salle certainly did not compose them. The oldest of these texts go back possibly as far back as 1669. Others date from 1681, 1671, 1696 and 1700.

One of the most interesting sources of these hymns is Abbe Simon Joseph PELLEGRIN. There is a somewhat hasty conclusion in the *Cahier Lasallien* No. 22 (p. IV, note 2) which says: "No text from the *Cantiques Spirituels...* by Abbe Pellegrin (Paris, Le Clerc, 1701) was included in the first (by date) of our two collections." If such a conclusion was reached it is obvious its author was unaware of the fact that in addition to Christmas carols and cantiques (hymns), Pellegrin published also in these same years some *Chanson Spirituelles*. In fact, De La Salle borrowed, and it was for his 1703 collection, hymn XXI, "Que de Trésors enrichissent mon âme" (What treasures enrich my soul) and XXIV, "Divin Agneau, qui sur l'autel..." (Divine Lamb, who on the altar...) These hymns were composed for the Jubilee France celebrated in 1701. The pupils in the Brothers' schools possibly sang these hymns even before they were included in De La Salle's collection approved in 1703. Two other hymns were also borrowed from Pellegrin. As far as the last group is concerned, thirteen out of the twenty-two hymns have been traced to their source. Consequently, we are in a position to say that a good forty of these texts were certainly not composed by De La Salle.

### Was there an arrangement between Pellegrin and De La Salle?

Among the works of Pellegrin referred to by CL. 22 there is the following: *Cantiques spirituels sur plusieurs points importants de la religion et de la morale chrétienne* (Hymns based on various important points of religion and Christian morality) for use during catechism and in the Christian schools, set to the finest old and new melodies, by Abbe Pellegrin and other authors. New edition, revised and corrected, Paris, Le Clerc, 1721, in-12,

96 p. (AMG). As the last page of this book has been heavily trimmed, a certain amount of information is missing. As it happens, I have found this missing information, and have discovered two interesting formulas of approbation. One acknowledges receipt of 24 hymns in manuscript form from Pellegrin on "this 15th day of September, 1713." The other refers to L. Ellies du Pin, who has given his approval to "Hymns for the use of the Christian schools, this 5th day of January, 1703." The hymns referred to here are exactly those included in CL 22. This means that these approbations are very important. They destroy in one fell swoop the contention that the hymns in CL 18 belong to an edition which was published somewhere between 1720 and 1730, as the 1952 Institute Bulletin would have us believe. It is now beyond doubt that all the hymns included in CL 18 belong to a 1760 edition. Up till now, those editing these collections have spoken only in terms of the two outside dates of 1703 (1705) and 1760. In between, it occurred to no one that the 1721 edition was an intermediate stage between the 1703 and the 1760 one. And yet, to convince oneself of the truth of this, all one had to do was to check carefully the approbations I referred to above.

And so a first gap has been filled in the history of the editions of hymns for the use of the Christians schools.

### Had I discovered a missing link?

This thought, lurking at the back of my head, became an exciting possibility when I was fortunate enough to discover a 1714 edition of "Cantiques spirituels... by Abbe Pellegrin and other authors." I rushed off to order a microfilm of the document so as to make a close study of it. It would be no exaggeration to say I had found a missing link. What I had discovered, in fact, was that the 1721 edition followed on directly from this 1714 edition, because Pellegrin referred to the approbation given him by Raguet on September 15th 1713. And in the 1714 edition, I found the complete text of this approbation which mentioned specifically which hymns, each clearly identified by a number, were approved.

Even more interesting than that was the reproduction of a "privilege" obtained by John Baptist de La Salle on December 19th 1711, which gave permission for the collection to be published. Pellegrin makes specific mention of this in his 1714 edition: "These newly approved hymns are published in virtue of a Privilege granted to Sieur de La Salle." Pellegrin is very fair: he gives the numbers of the hymns he has borrowed from De La Salle's edition. There are twenty-one of them.

So the question remains whether De La Salle and Pellegrin actually worked together and had some formal agreement. Further research is needed to discover the answer to this and to other questions. What we have established, however, is a linked series of editions: 1703 (1705), 1714, 1721 and 1760. We know who was responsible for them. But there are still other editions waiting to be discovered. These could throw real light on the significance of the collections of hymns for the use of the Christian schools, and on John Baptist de La Salle's real contribution to them.

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