

LETTER TO THE LASALLIAN FAMILY (4)

3 - JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE:

A RESPONSE (1)

1. DE LA SALLE: TEACHER, FATHER, SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

«De La Salle's thinking has lost none of its astonishing relevance: its influence extends beyond the Brothers' communities; it reaches out to all who wish to work, guided by his inspiration». (*Letter, p. 14*)

St. John Baptist de La Salle is very well known the whole world over because of his educational work and his innovations in the teaching of the common people. However, there is one aspect of this genius which was somewhat neglected initially, and which is becoming more and more evident and significant as time goes on, and that is that of St. John Baptist de La Salle as a Master of the Spiritual life.

This has become increasingly recognised in the last 20 or 30 years not only within the Institute, but also in other religious and ecclesiastical circles, and more recently among lay people in contact with the Brothers.

But if we speak about St. La Salle as a master of the spiritual life, we must speak also of Lasallian spirituality and by logical progression of the spiritual life. These terms are used fairly loosely, and it would perhaps help to define them a little.

We use fairly commonly such expressions as cultivating spiritual life, not neglecting spiritual life, deepening spiritual life. We speak even about revitalising it. Obviously this spiritual life we are talking about is Christian and it can be so only to the degree to which we realize therein a life of personal relationship with God, this already implies that our spiritual life must be constructed on the basis of the Word of God and of faith: the Word by which God calls man to Himself the faith by which man recognizes, accepts this call» (1).

This leads us quite naturally to speak of the existence of Christian spirituality. «No Christian spirituality worthy of the name can exist where the conviction has been weakened that God, in Christ, has made Himself known to us by His own words, this own acts, as Some One. The whole spiritual life of Christians is aroused and formed by the fact that, as they believe, God has spoken to us and that his living Word has been made flesh amongst us. In other words, in Christianity the spiritual life does not start from a certain conception of God, not even from the idea that He is a personal God, but from faith, the faith which is proper to Christianity: that is, the assent we give to the Word of God, to the Word which is made known to us, which is given to us in Christ Jesus.» (2)

«Spiritual, in the Christian vocabulary means "what has to do with the Holy Spirit", "what is inspired by the Holy Spirit", "what the Holy Spirit transforms within". Spirituality is, therefore, the religious, or divine or Christian or spiritual dimension of the moral sphere. In biblical terms it is expressed as Covenant or Kingdom; in theological (or catechetical) terms as grace. Whatever words are used, it is a plane of divinisation». (*The Spirituality of Lay People and of Religious Life by P. Varillon, SJ, p. 6*)

2. LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY

«For all those that lay claim to his name, Brothers and lay people alike, John Baptist de La Salle is now, even more than in the past, a teacher and a source of inspiration». (*Letter, p. 20*)

First of all, let us ask ourselves if we can really speak of a Lasallian spirituality. Yes, without the shadow of a doubt we can. There are, of course, some writers who are somewhat loath to speak about specific spiritualities, especially those which originate in religious congregations or other religious movements. They prefer to insist on one single Christian spirituality, followed by all Christians without distinction, whatever the period of history or culture. The unwillingness to recognise diverse spiritualities in the Church stems from the fear sometimes that they will become esoteric systems, leading possibly to absurd competition or senseless rivalry, and forgetting one essential thing: all spirituality is firmly rooted in the Gospel.

The history of Christianity shows us quite clearly how the Gospel of Jesus has been lived and applied to everyday life by Christians, in a variety of ways, with a variety of stresses according to historical periods and different social and cultural settings. This has given rise to different "spiritualities", and consequently, to different "schools of spirituality". It is like a bunch of flowers from the same garden. There are many different ways of arranging flowers to produce a harmonious and attractive general effect. In the same way, in the Church, all the various "spiritualities" taken together reveal the immense wealth of the single Gospel message of Jesus.

On the other hand, it is sufficient simply to listen to the Magisterium of the Church when it speaks to religious and other groups of committed Christians to realise how much its pastors and especially the Pope encourage them to live fully and with complete fidelity according to the spiritual teachings left by Founders to their sons and disciples.

One question arises quite naturally as a result of what we have just said: What is the reason or what are the reasons for this diversity of spiritualities? We must begin by saying that it is God who chooses men and women in the Church and at different times in human history, and especially at certain critical moments, to face up to and meet the specific needs of the People of God. Normally, most of them have a very strong and distinctive personality and the gift of being able to create a following. They are quite clearly persons who have been conditioned or influenced by the milieu in which they have lived, by the education they have received, and by other factors of an historical or cultural nature.

There are two main factors which, combined, bring about the birth and consolidation of a spirituality in the Church: in the first place, there must have been at one point or another a unique experience of God, coloured more or less by the particular psychological make-up of the Founder; and secondly, stemming from the above, his first disciples must have undergone a process of profound spiritual training.

The experiences of the Founder and his first disciples which lie at the root of this birth and consolidation took place in a specific spiritual climate and in the context of specific spiritual needs at a particular historical period. The fruitfulness of a spirituality depends on the fidelity and inventiveness of its disciples in the course of time. By fidelity we do not mean the mechanical and slavish reproduction of the initial formula, but a fresh response, inspired and nourished by the intentions and attitudes of the Founder and his first disciples, in other words, "fidelity to his spirit and specific intentions".

The case of De La Salle is typical: the reason why our Founder has been given the title of Master of the Spiritual Life is because of the influence of his life as "a man of God", both on his disciples as well as on his contemporaries.

His spiritual teaching, based on his own experience, was certainly first and foremost directed towards the training of his followers, the first Brothers. However, it was not long before others came to him –priests, religious, lay people, even heretics and public sinners– to benefit from his spiritual wealth, his guidance and the sanctity of his life. We can see in this, as it were, a foreshadowing of what is happening now, 300 years later, in the Lasallian Family.

We should not forget that he composed the "Meditations for the Time of Retreat" «for the use of everyone involved in the education of young people, and in particular for the retreat made by the Brothers of the Christian Schools during the holidays».

«The Brothers are convinced that in the life, work and writings of St. John Baptist de La Salle, the Holy Spirit is revealed in a privileged manner, and that they will find there even today a living principle for their guidance» (Decl. 5, 1)

«Fidelity to the present moment of history and fidelity to the Founder, far from opposing or excluding each other, are closely related, provided that we do not expect St. John Baptist de La Salle to have known in advance all our problems and the answers to all our questions». (Decl. 6, 1)

- (1) Louis Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality*, Desclée Company, Tournai, 1961, p. 25.
- (2) *Ibid.* p. 6.

Brother Hernando Sebá López