

S. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE AND OPENNESS TO THE WORLD (1/2)

Pope Paul VI, speaking to the members of the 3rd World Congress on the Apostolate of the Laity, had the following to say:

«The world is your field of action. You are immersed in it by your vocation» (15/10/67).

Nearly three centuries earlier, St. John Baptist de La Salle addressed these words to religious educators:

«Your profession requires you to mix every day with the world, where your every step is watched. It behoves you, therefore, to be a model of every virtue for the seculars among whom you live» (Med. 69, 3).

And nowadays we can read in the new Rule of our Institute:

«The Brothers live out their consecration in a community of the Church. Such a community affirms the duty and the possibility of renewing the world in the spirit of the Gospel» (R. 23). Elsewhere the Rule tells us that this community is committed to the educational apostolate; that it is characterised by great openness to others; that it is integrated into a wider pastoral care programme; and that it is interested in cultural groups and other aspects of social work.

Priests, religious and lay people are sent out into the world as the seed of life to transform it by the action of the Holy Spirit.

WHO IS THE WORLD?

We should perhaps first of all define the meaning of this word by looking in the dictionary.

- In current usage it means the planet we live on.
- When Jesus said that *«God so loved the world that he gave his Son»*, it is clear that "world" meant all people. It is a world, fallen because of its sin, a world that the Redeemer came to save, *«For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved»* (John 3, 16-17).

– So what is this world that Jesus curses and condemns, the world for which *«he does not pray»*? It is the world of which he said: *«it (the world) does hate me, because I give evidence that its ways are evil»* (John 7, 7); it is the world described by St. John: *«the world has to offer the sensual body, the lustful eye, pride in possessions»* (I John 2, 16); it is all the people whose "prince" is Satan (cf. John 14, 30 & 16, 11); it is all those whose perverse or misguided beliefs that are contrary to the maxims of the Gospel; it is those who do not belong to the Kingdom of God.

Whether hidden or overt, the influence of the world is felt everywhere.

Pope Paul VI, speaking to the members of this same Congress on the Apostolate of the Laity, has this to say:

«Under the influence of a thousand and more factors, the world is naturally moving towards a state which has been described by certain contemporary thinkers –to the joy of some and the chagrin of others– by such terms as secular, laicised, desacralized. We note with much sadness that there are Catholic writers who, in opposition to the 2.000 year old tradition of the Church, look forward to the gradual reduction, even the eventual disappearance, of the sacred character of places, times and persons».

The Sovereign Pontiff then added: *«Your apostolate, dear Sons and dear Daughters, is to oppose this trend».*

– This word is used in yet another way which can cause confusion: the world, as opposed to the monastery, is the mass of people who live their Christian lives in a way that is very praiseworthy and blessed by the sacrament of marriage, but which is different from that of Christians who consecrate themselves to God in the priesthood or by celibacy by the vows of religion and the practice of the evangelical counsels, and in conformity with a Rule approved by the Church.

That world is neither wicked nor cursed: God has willed it and sanctity flourishes in it, but it is distinct from the world of consecrated people. To return to it after having renounced it can be an act of infidelity. St. Paul, abandoned by one of his "faithful helpers" writes sadly about him: *«Demas has left me through love of the world».*

AVOIDANCE OR PRESENCE?

The real Lasallian paradox consists in shunning the world in order to be closer to it.

It is important to grasp the exact meaning of the teachings of St. John Baptist de La Salle. He is not unaware of the need that teachers have to have social contacts.

«Your duties oblige you to have occasional relations with the world» (Med. 127, 2).

He advises, then, much less a physical separation which, however, he still insists on as far as possible, than a kind of effective but prudent presence, following the recommendation of St. Paul who says we should give up all our "worldly ambitions" and «be self-restrained and live good and religious lives here in this present world» (Titus 2, 12). And so in his Meditations he says the following:

«St. Leo forbade religious to meddle with secular matters» (114). *«Hold in horror all frequentation of it (the world) and have no communication with those who are in it except in so far as it is necessary»* (Med. 182, 1). *«Beware lest you imbibe its spirit»* (Med. 127, 2).

He asks us to behave in it as religious:

«Learn from this Saint to live and move in the world without participating in its corruption, its views or its maxims» (Med. 174, 3).

And the desire to renounce the world:

«Have you so completely rid yourself of it as to never think of it? Are you quite free of every attachment?» (Med. 144, 1)

According to him, to be in the world is like being for a short time in a place of work:

«You will not cause your name to be noised abroad, but you will be in the world merely as passers-by, occupied solely in the work of God, causing Jesus to live in the hearts of those he has given you to instruct» (Med. 6, 2)

The Founder's greatest wish is that the presence of the Brother in the world should bear witness to love for Christ and the neighbour; and that this presence be a burning light constantly fed but never dimmed by it.

«Your faith should be... a beacon for those whom you instruct» (Med. 178, 1)

And from St. Paul he borrows the following idea which is dear to him: *«We are Christ's incense to God for those who are being saved and for those who are not»* (2 Cor. 2, 15).

«Your employment requires that you should have some communication with outsiders. Be on your guard to be ever a subject of edification... So act that your exterior appearance, all your words and actions may breathe virtue. It is only for this reason that God wishes you to go out. Prepare yourself in your retreat to comply with his intentions» (Med. 98, 2).

Finally, the Saint wishes this presence in the world to be a real and effective apostolate, in accordance with Jesus' instructions to his apostles: «and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit» (John 15, 16). The Founder too sends his Brothers out into the world and tells them that the best way to make their apostolate effective is to stay away from the world (cf. Med. 146, 143).

He returns often to the same ideas, and like a blacksmith hammering on his anvil, he forges solid convictions. And so a religious lives in the world like a soldier well-armed for the battle ahead, or like a workman fully equipped for his work.

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