

**S. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE****AND OPENNESS TO THE WORLD**

(2/2)

**PRESENCE IN THE WORLD  
AND INTIMACY WITH GOD**

Lasallian spirituality is constantly concerned with two things: to avoid everything in the world which is an obstacle to a life of union with God; and to attain intimacy with God so as to be more effective in one's apostolate.

However, if the Founder fears over-familiarity with the world to this extent, it is not because he questions the goodwill of the Brothers, but rather because he wishes to protect them from a very real danger. He wants also to ensure that they have the necessary peace and quiet for union with God.

*«The less you converse with men, the more will God communicate himself to you»* (Med. 111, 1)

He sees this peace as being necessary for interior life:

*«In the restfulness of solitude, forgotten by the world and occupied only with the thought of our sins and of the way to live holily, we find God and can seek to please him»* (Med. 174, 2).

Union with God is essential if our apostolate is to be effective in the world: a lamp that has gone out gives no light:

*«As you stand in need of both these things (the Spirit of God and zeal) you should seek retirement from the world where neither can be found. As Our Lord has said: "For the truth-giving Spirit the world can find no room, because it cannot see him, cannot recognise him". This is because the maxims and practices which the Spirit of God inspires are clean contrary to those of the world»* (Med. 189, 2).

And he continues elsewhere:

*«It is frequent intercourse with the world which usually destroys religious, because such associations withdraw them from the communications they should hold with God. There can be no alliance between the Spirit of God and that of the world. Hence, we no sooner become impregnated with the spirit of the one than we lose the other»* (Med. 174, 3).

The Saint returns constantly to the cause and effect relationship between union with God and effective presence in the world. They are like the weft and warp of the tapestry of our religious life:

*«Since you have left the world in order to lead a life above the merely natural life and human inclinations, so that you can labour for the salvation of your neighbour, your whole study should be to seek God alone. You should apply yourself to the ministry to which he has called you, and devote yourself entirely to spiritual things»* (Med. 58, 3).

Like a weaver's shuttle, we dart from one to the other:

*«You should love retirement which enables you to work efficaciously at your own perfection, but you should leave it when God requires you to labour for the salvation of the souls he has entrusted to your care. But, after the example of St. Anthony, you should return at once to your solitude when your task has been accomplished»* (Med. 97, 3).

**PRESENCE OR SEPARATION?**

A religious is a consecrated person, separated by his state from Christians living in the world, but living among them as leaven in dough.

In our own days, the Conciliar Decree "Perfectae Caritatis" has clearly defined the meaning of the religious state, the consecration of its members, and their separation from the world, whatever the nature of their apostolate:

*«The members of each community should recall above everything else that by their profession of the evangelical counsels they have given answer to a divine call to live for God alone... (and they) should combine contemplation with apostolic love. By the former they adhere to God in mind and heart; by the latter they strive to associate themselves with the work of redemption and to spread the kingdom of God»* (Chap. 5).

It follows that one cannot say that religious and lay Christians in the world are identical, although the latter also are bound by their baptismal vows to bear witness in the world.

This separation which characterises religious was stressed by Pope Paul VI when he spoke to the members of the General Chapter on June 7th 1966:

*«You are religious, consecrated, and men of the Church».*

The Founder's thinking on this point is inspired by the words of Jesus to his Apostles: *«My choice withdrew you from the world»* (John 15, 19), and can be summarised as follows: the religious educator has to live in the midst of the world, without belonging to the world, without adopting its way of thinking:

*«Have no communication with it (the world)... Do not suffer that it should have any access to you, lest by dealing with it you contract its spirit»* (Med. 41, 2).

**LOVE OR INTIMACY?**

It is true that one cannot achieve anything without love, but it is important to avoid ambivalence. It is not the world that one hates, but what is evil in it; and the world itself, only in so far as it identifies itself with the evil that is in it. St. John is very clear about this: *«You must not love this passing world or anything that is in the world. The love of the Father cannot be in any man who loves the world»* (1 John, 2, 15). St. James says something similar: *«Making the world your friend is making God your enemy»* (James, 4, 4).

St. John Baptist de La Salle cannot be accused of exaggeration when he says:

«Are you completely disgusted with the world?» (Med. 174, 2)

«Do you hold in disgust all that constitutes the pleasure of worldlings?» (Med. 144, 1).

He quotes St. Paul to show the incompatibility between love for the world and love for Christ: «If I still wanted that (man's approval), I should not be what I am – a servant of Christ» (Med. 182, 1)

In fact, did not our Divine Master say: «If the world hates you, remember that it hated me before you» (John 15, 18)? The Founder bases himself often on this text to encourage his followers to bear patiently the difficulties the world puts in their way.

## PRESENCE OR ASSIMILATION?

Presence in the world must not mean fusion, identification or assimilation. We must keep our religious, consecrated and separated character as described by the Council. This is exactly what St. John Baptist de La Salle thought:

«You ought, as St. Paul says, "to be clothed in the new self, which is created in God's image, justified and sanctified through the truth"» (Med. 60, 2).

«Have you given up your worldly ways? Your manner of life, no less than your habit, should be entirely different from that of worldlings» (Med. 60, 1).

In our own days (1968), the Vicar of Christ has much the same thing to say, as we can see from the audience he held on December 11th 1968:

«We deplore the attitude of certain priests who, in order to come closer to the world, believe that by changing the way they dress and by living in the world like lay people, they can come closer to the world. Such a form of identification gives the immediate impression of making contact. Let us be careful, however, that this contact does not make the priest lose his efficaciousness and his specific role, this role which distinguishes him, which places him in the midst of people to whom he is called to preach the message and with whom he must not become assimilated socially and materially».

And St. John Baptist de La Salle had this to say:

«People ought to be able to distinguish a person who is consecrated to God from an ordinary secular by his appearance and by the way in which he behaves, for he owes edification not only to the wise but to all, as St. Paul says» (Med. 92, 2).

There is also in this context, the famous allocution of Pope Paul VI, given on November 16th 1966, to the members of the General Congregation of the Jesuits:

«Some were under the illusion that, in order to spread the Gospel, it was necessary to adopt the ways of the world, its ways of thinking and acting, and its profane character. By doing so they forgot that, if a herald of Christ has the apostolic duty to come close to the people to whom he has to deliver the message of Christ, he cannot become identified with them in such a way that the salt loses its taste, and the apostle his specific strength».

## CONCLUSION

St. John Baptist de La Salle considered well-judged contact with the world to be so important, that he included it in his final recommendation on his death bed. The last will and testament of a Founder is as precious for his followers as that of a father for his sons:

«If you wish to preserve and die in your vocation, have nothing to do with people of the world; because, little by little, you will start to appreciate the way they act, and you will become so involved in their conversations that, through tact, you will not be able to avoid showing agreement with what they say however harmful it may be. This will lead you to be unfaithful, and once you no longer observe your Rules, you will lose interest in your vocation and eventually abandon it» (Blain).

The Saint's 40 years spent in founding the Institute, and the experience of religious throughout history, show that flirting with the world is to play with fire.

This teaching is demanding and austere. It is the teaching of the Gospel: it is the narrow and rough road which leads to God and true happiness here below. There is no suffering to compare with that of a divided heart that gives itself at the same time to the world and to God; or an overburdened heart where God and the world are in competition. St. John Baptist de La Salle joins St. Augustine in saying:

«Mere trifles hold me back and prevent me from belonging wholly to God» (Med. 173, 2).

On the other hand, how great is the joy of a heart free from all attachments to the world and its demands!

Jesus said to his Apostles: «Be brave: I have conquered the world» (John 16, 33). His victory ensures our own, and the Holy Spirit assures us of this: «Anyone who has been begotten by God has already overcome the world; this is the victory over the world – our faith» (1 John, 5, 4). Inspired by these words, the Founder advises his followers:

«Faith should lead you to despise what the world esteems» (Med. 96, 2).

His final words are to them:

«How happy are you to share the same lot as these Apostles, and the advantage of having left the world» (Med. 182, 1).

**Brother Gabriel Emonnet**