

PLACES WHERE THERE IS A SPECIAL EXPERIENCE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD FOR LASALLIANS

To some of you this title may appear somewhat strange.

God is everywhere. He can reveal his presence as he sees fit.

As for us, we can discover him or find him in favourable times and places. St John Baptist de La Salle put it well when he was reflecting on the experience of Saint Teresa: *«And so, as she found everything in finding God, she had the happiness of finding God everywhere: whatever her situation and wherever she happened to be, God was her guide»* (Med 177, 3).

However, it requires an effort to grasp this truth. To the extent that Brothers and their lay colleagues concern themselves with De La Salle's teaching, the need arises to grasp at a deeper level what we might call the "originality of Lasallian spirituality".

As Christian educators make more frequent references to La Salle in carrying out their "ministry", the necessity is felt for deeper consideration, from an educational viewpoint, of the peculiar weighting of such Lasallian terms as: mission, ministry, spirit of faith and zeal... That shouldn't surprise us. We know that every spiritual experience has its roots in two realities always to be found in the Bible from the epoch of Abraham right up to the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. *The experience of faith is, at the same time a theological and a human experience.*

In the Bible, the spiritual experience is centred on a relationship with the God of the Covenant. And this *relationship* with the God of the Covenant brings with it a new way of understanding reality. And so there arises a movement "of contemplation and of communion". For we can contemplate God through all the events of our life and through these events enter into "comunión" with them without turning away from the real living experience. This contemplation/communion means that our whole life is transformed: we enter into a whole new mode of perceiving, evaluating and owning our being.

And so, we find ourselves at the very heart of the life of faith as it is presented to us by De La Salle. The eyes – the eyes of faith – are focused on the experience, for it is precisely there that the God of history reveals himself. The experience, therefore, is that special place where God is revealed, the God of salvation, the God Father who has assumed in his son Jesus, our every day actions and who offers us his love.

Very often, too, we speak of meeting God at the very core of life. Pope Paul VI would say "at those points when now and the yet-to-come interact" (*Octogesima Adveniens*, n° 51).

This concept is present in every "spirituality". Always, at their centre, emerges a dynamic principle of Christian faith, which gives to existence a new Gospel identity. By way of verification, all that is needed, is a rapid survey of the fruitful history of the Gospel, as incarnated in the Founders (Foundresses) the "Mothers or Fathers of our spiritual Families".

Saint John Baptist de La Salle raised up in the Community of the Church a striking new way of living out the spirit of the Gospel. The Gospel journey followed by De La Salle brought forth a "new model" of the Christian life specially appropriate for groups of Christians who identify with him and who feel bonded to him in a special way, those particularly who commit themselves to the field of education and culture.

But it often happens, that in Lasallian schools, some men and women of faith feel they rather "disciples" of St Teresa, of St Augustine, of St Francis of Assisi rather than of John Baptist de La Salle. There are also more who belong to modern spiritual groups (Focolari, Charismatics, New catechumens) or who are active members of Catholic Action groups or of Christ Cursillos. Coming from faith groups having their roots in other "spiritual families", some Lasallians fail to appreciate the originality of our **Lasallian Spiritual Family**.

Something even more fundamental sometime happens. Some Brothers seem to have experienced in their year of formation an initiation into the spirituality of Benedict or Ignatius rather than into that of De La Salle. As a result of this at a later period, it is difficult in practice, for them to live as "Disciples of De La Salle". This situation, also makes difficult dialogue and sharing within a Lasallian educational Community.

I would like to cite, by way of example, the experience of spirituality shared with some educators from Lasallian schools who belong to the "spiritual family" of Charles de Foucauld.

With the limitations imposed by the comparison of two texts (the expression of two spiritual experiences) and aware of the danger of reductionism and distortion I take the risk of offering this twofold reading.

WHERE DOES THE DISCIPLE OF CHARLES DE FOUCAULD FIND GOD?

Here is a text in support of our point of view.

«Every place is good for you; the countryside, the highway, the roads are delightful; Jesus is there with you, in you, around you, you possess him, he possesses you, he penetrates you, he enfolds you, he is in you and you are in him. Oh! how happy you are, on the way, at rest, in solitude, as you journey along everywhere, always. You feel yourself in Jesus, with Jesus, you have him with you, you contemplate him, you adore him, you lose yourself in him and you are lost in him...» (Considerations on the feasts of the year, page 367, Ed. Nouvelle Cité).

In the life of a man or woman who feels himself called to live a contemplative life at the heart of the story of man, all life's moments are transformed into the Place of an en-

counter with Jesus, their Lord. This way of understanding and of taking up one's life, is profoundly influenced by the **God who is present**. It is a presence that one contemplates and with which one enters into "communion". Let us underline the most significant effects of this spirituality: the believer is, in a certain sense, impregnated, moved, shaken, amazed by his God, because he is a witness to the reality of his Word: **"And I am with you all days, even to the end of time"** (Mt 28, 20).

WHERE DOES THE DISCIPLE OF ST JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE FIND GOD?

The Lasallian texts that can be cited are numerous and they are consistent. For now, let me linger on one only.

«St. Ignatius was so filled with the spirit of Jesus Christ and His holy love that the sacred name of Jesus was constantly on his lips. By this means he communicated this divine love to those whom he instructed, as well as to those with whom he conversed. As he himself was wholly devoted to Christ and consecrated to Him for preaching the gospel, so he wished his disciples to be specially attached to Jesus and to labour for Him alone.

If you are a true lover of Christ you will take every possible means to instil His holy love in the hearts of your children whom you train to be His disciples, and your aim will be that they think often of Jesus, their good and only Master; that they speak frequently of Jesus, that they aspire only after Jesus, and that they live for Him alone.» (Med. 102, 2)

This text is a good "key" for interpreting the Lasallian experience of God. We find a similar "key" in the Meditations for the Times of Retreat as also in Meditations 90, 91 and 92 concerning the examination (the reading) which the Brother makes at the end of the year of his experience of God at the centre of his life.

Although the meditations for the end of the year are addressed to the Brothers there is no doubt that their purpose is of value for Christian educators in general. This is more obvious in the Meditations for the Times of Retreat and the text cited above.

We can say, therefore, that **it is in the depths of his being and in the fulfilment of his ministry that the Lasallian experiences the God that saves.**

In my opinion, therefore, the Lasallian has an exceptional experience of faith in the following three areas: community, school, the Word of God.

In this article for Lasallian, I would want to emphasize the second of these "Places": **The school**, in its fullest sense, that is to say in so much as it is the "field of God" where the Lasallian carries out "the work of God".

The school, in effect represents for La Salle a profound and authentic spiritual reality. By following his teaching we can affirm that the Lasallian school is indeed a "Godlyplace". God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who wants all of his sons and daughters to be saved, is present at the heart of the school and he offers us the possibility of transforming it into the place of his saving action. The Lasallian schools **«are characterised by the determination to make the means of salvation available to young people through a quality education and by an explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ»** (Rule, 13).

This is to say that a Christian educator, a true disciple of De La Salle will find God at the heart of the school and will live out his faith as an act of communion with the plan of a loving God who wills that education be an instrument of salvation.

- The educational process, that is to say the organization of the school,
- relationship within the school,
- the quality of teaching and of the students' work,
- the planning and putting into operation of the "Education Plan,
- the integration of the Educational Community,
- the nature of the dialogue within the educational process,
- the formation of persons,
- the work of interiorization, personalization, socialization,
- the proclamation of the Word of Jesus,
- the introduction to prayer,
- the opening-up to society and the Church...

In all of these realities the Lasallian is exposed to the possibility of experiencing his (her) identity as a man or woman of faith and of faith community. If one bears this in mind, one can doubtless understand better this text – short but significant – of the Rule: *«The Brothers live their faith as a gift received for the ministry of Christian education»* (N° 20).

Thus by living out faith and zeal at the heart of the school, the Lasallian educator transforms his "work" into a true "ministry" (cf. Rule, n° 13). It is in this way, in my view, that **the Lasallian experience of faith is accomplished.**

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