

**THE MEDITATIONS
OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE
- I - (1/2)**

PREFACE

These introductory remarks are directed especially to those readers who take up this book of **Meditations of St. John Baptist de La Salle** translated into Italian with little or no knowledge of the author, his work, his spiritual doctrine, the historical period in which he lived nor of his other written works.

Given that we have here an author who is not writing for a vast public, but rather a **Founder** who has in view a specific formation for his spiritual sons, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, a few clarifications are necessary for those who are not Christian Brothers. Instead of stressing the difficulties which some readers may have, it would be more advantageous to offer some information which would make it easier and more profitable to peruse these Meditations which were written three hundred years ago, for a well-defined audience, with a clear intent toward the formation of a young religious family dedicated to the apostolate of Christian Schools within the historical framework of France in the 17th and 18th centuries...

This background should be kept in mind by those who, today, desire to know the perennially valid teaching of the Founder of the Christian Schools, to touch the essence of a spiritual experience which preserves its freshness and its creative, apostolic inspiration in the pages of these Meditations. Of course, on some pages this may be somewhat obscured by the dust of time and a style proper to a period now long past. But it is not difficult to wipe it away and restore the brilliance of a treasure of experience and doctrine which the Meditations offer and which is still extraordinarily relevant today.

The pages that follow are an introduction to a **personal reading** of the Meditations and therefore the techniques of scholarship were avoided as far as possible.

Omitted also is the listing of editions because they are already in the Italian translation. Likewise omitted are all the scholarly notes which go beyond the scope of this presentation.

1. AN OPERA IN THREE ACTS

As far as subject matter is concerned, the Meditations of St. John Baptist de La Salle form three distinct series:

a/ **Meditations for the Sundays of the Liturgical Year (1-77).**

b/ **Meditations for the Principal Feasts of the Year (78-192).**

c/ **Meditations for the Time of Retreat (193-208).**

The difference between the three series arises not only from the general source of inspiration of the meditations; i. e., the Gospel of the Sunday Mass for the Sunday series; the lives of the Saints or the religious theme of the anniversary for the series on the Feasts; the ministry of education in the Catholic School for the Retreat series.

There are more important differences to be considered by the reader who seeks to profit from reading these works.

A very astute observation was made by one who has studied the Founder in depth: *«It is best not try to read the Meditations in the order in which they are presented, and certainly not to start off with N° 1. Perhaps it might be a good idea to begin with the series on the Saints»* (Saturnino Gallego, *San Juan Bautista de La Salle*, Vol. II, p. 286. Madrid, 1986).

What are the reasons for such practical advice to a reader who is not a member of the Congregation of De La Salle?

They may be summarized as follows.

a) The **Meditations for Sundays**, by and large, take up themes which refer to the personal and community lives of the Religious addressed, in this case the Brothers of the Christian Schools. They are often a continuous series of thoughts on the same topic; for example, that of obedience (Med. 7-15), difficulties in the spiritual life (30-36), prayer (36-39), religious and community life (57-60 and 62-77), etc.

Even though the «ministry of education» is always present in the background since the persons addressed are all educators, this aspect is not particularly stressed except occasionally (Med 33, 37, 56, 61...). Therefore, at first glance, this series would seem to have less interest for the majority of non-Religious readers.

b) **Meditations for Feast Days**, on the other hand, and in particular in reference to the lives of the Saints, lend themselves more easily to practical applications in a spiritual and apostolic life dedicated to the educational ministry with all its demands and circumstances.

Of the 115 Meditations in this series, at least 90 refer to the teaching of children. Consequently, they are closer to the experiences and the spiritual needs of a wider circle of readers.

Although they were composed for the Brothers of the Christian Schools and have specific reference to the Religious State, still they are well suited to guide and foster a spirituality for Christians dedicated to the ministry of teaching.

«*The meditations on the saints inspire admiration for the creative power of the Holy Spirit in God's people and invite the Brothers to increase their zeal during their daily contact with the students they teach...*» (Sauvage-Campos, *To announce the Gospel to the poor*. Paris, 1977, p. 283).

c) A precious jewel apart are the 16 **Meditations for the Time of Retreat**. In contradistinction to the two previous collections in which each meditation is complete in itself, here we have an extended and systematic development of the **theme of education** with a clearly unified structure and a very original balance between a serious theology of education and practical suggestions for the development of the Christian teaching profession.

These meditations represent the most immediate and direct way for educators, lay or not, to approach Lasallian spirituality. In this case, from the very beginning, it was stated that the author had in mind an audience far beyond the Brothers: «*For the use of persons dedicated to the education of youth and in particular, for the retreat which the Brothers make during the time of vacation*» is the sub-title for the first printed edition.

As far as those for whom De La Salle destined his works are concerned, the observation of Saturnino Gallego is pertinent: «*Does De La Salle address himself to all Christian educators or only to the Brothers? Let us make a clarification. For the Founder of the Christian Schools, the Brother is the "analogatum princeps" of the Christian teacher. He writes first of all for him, not as a consecrated Religious, but as a Brother; i. e., as a consecrated teacher. Therefore, all that he writes is valid also for the Christian lay teacher who can read and apply to himself this doctrine which, without doubt, was directly thought through in view of a particular educator, the Brother.*» (Gallego, Op. cit. p. 24).

After this brief introduction, we can now suggest an approach to the actual texts of the Meditations of De La Salle by those readers who wish to read them more carefully.

2. The Structure of the Meditations.

The purpose of the Meditations is to **suggest ideas** for personal or community mental prayer.

They present fundamental truths for reflection and prayer. Originally they were designed to serve as an introduction to the period of mental prayer which the Brothers made each morning. One of the Brothers read the meditation aloud for the whole community. Therefore, it is clear that the book was not destined for personal reading.

Even when read very slowly, the reading of one meditation only took about five minutes and the rest of the time was spent in personal prayer according to the "**method**" taught by the Founder in another of his works. «*The Explanation of the Method of mental Prayer*» (Cahiers Lasalliens N° 4 and 50).

The **structure** of the meditations is uniform throughout. Each meditation is divided into three points. Saturnino Gallego explains, «*The style is original –one fact from the Sunday's Gospel or from the biography of the Saint whose feast is being commemorated (in this case each point focuses on one of his virtues); a brief reflection on this fact: then a practical application to the life of the Brother who is directly addressed as "you" in a very pointed question. Given De La Salle's temperament which was practical rather than imaginative, we find scarcely any paragons of virtue or heroes. Rarely do we find exclamations and still more rarely any emoting. There is a heavy predominance of indicatives, imperatives and interrogations*» (Gallego, Op. cit., p. 286).

As far as the **Meditations for Feast Days** is concerned, «*De La Salle has proceeded in the same fashion*». Each point is developed in reference to the well-specified theme stated at the beginning. In the case of the Saints, he stresses a particular virtue, or he shows how the cause of God or of the Church was championed within his sphere of influence. From this, De La Salle makes an application relative to the spiritual lives of his disciples or the way they should act in their profession. Frequently there is a brief exhortation, inserted among the examples given, together with a recommendation to do in like manner. (J. G. Rodrigue, Cahier Lasallien 47, p. 26).

In spite of their limited theme, even the **Meditations for the Time of Retreat** which were the first to be composed, follow the same pattern of three points and the same internal development of each.

Bro. Mario Presciuttini