

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

3. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LASALLIAN STYLE.

A few remarks are in order, here, concerning the characteristic style of the Meditations. A few were given above, but they call for further development.

We must repeat that De La Salle is not a professional writer nor a literary figure seeking recognition. Each of his works has a precise practical purpose to which his writing is adapted, at least to a certain extent.

Certainly Lasallian works such as *Devoirs d'un chrétien* (a catechetical treatise with questions and answers, Cahier Lasallien 20) or the *Rules of Christian Politeness* (a treatise on courtesy, Cahier Lasallien 19), which were written for a wider audience gave him quite a reputation because about a hundred editions appeared. They have a more accurate composition and a more literary turn of phrase. As for the Meditations, probably the Founder did not even plan to have them printed.

However, the basic style, which reflects the man and his character, especially when he writes with no literary pretensions and no intention of going into print remains recognizably constant in all his works.

In particular with regard to the Meditations, we can point out the following principal characteristics:

Brevity

His style straightforward, with no trace of grandiloquence. J. G. Rodrigue remarks: «Brevity seems to be the outstanding characteristic of the writings of this Saint, especially in his Meditations. Basically, it flows from his very personality. Nothing in De La Salle even hints at his being inclined to oratory, apologetics or bantering (Op. Cit. p. 27).

Compactness

This is the co-relative of brevity and flows from his profound and personal understanding of those for whom he wrote the Meditations, as well as the circumstances of their life. He knows that there is no need to establish background before discussing anything with

them. Their experiences together are reflected in the Meditations which often evoke them without the need to describe or explain them. Of course, many expressions were better appreciated by the first Brothers than they are by modern readers who are not familiar with the events lived during the first 40 years of the Institute. I will come back later to the importance of reading the Meditations in the light of the lived biographical experience of the Founder and the spiritual reality of the founding of the Christian Schools in order to appreciate all the richness which is buried in some of the texts of the meditations. The full resonance of certain texts will then achieve their true vibrancy.

Discretion and balance

These result from a judicious use of adjectives, and carefulness to avoid exaggerations; i. e., in qualifying the actions of people or in expressing admiration, etc.

De La Salle is also very prudent about qualifying as "miraculous" those happenings which are difficult to explain from a merely human point of view. The calm and prudent consideration he gives to important matters according to his biographers, is reflected in the pages of his meditations.

Decisiveness and realism

These stand out in a special way in the examinations of conscience which he proposes and in the manner of applying the results of a meditation to daily life.

The decisive and realistic tone is achieved especially by his constant use of "you" (it appears at least in 95% of the points for meditation). This turns the reader in upon himself as he feels himself personally involved in what he is reading or hearing.

Incontrovertibility

The theme is presented as incontrovertible, an absolute. De La Salle strongly identifies himself with the aspect of the spiritual life he is dealing with in the meditation, especially if it deals with a virtue or an attitude which is essential and very important for his disciples. «He loves to stress very strongly the idea he is developing, but without losing his eloquent balance» (Gallego, Op. cit. p. 5).

Some expressions, like "the most important...", "the first...", "the principal...", "the fundamental...", which appear from time to time concerning certain topics (poverty, mental prayer, piety, penance, obedience, regularity, Spirit of Faith, humility...) may bother some readers who are overly concentrated on the literal text.

Actually, De La Salle is merely trying to stress the importance of the matter, rather than establish fixed priorities or hierarchies.

Syntax

Finally, a word about the syntax. This is sometimes complicated because of the excessive use of subordi-

nate clauses and quotations from the **Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church** (1) which make certain sentences too long and complicated.

This is more of a problem in the original French editions. The translations try to make the thought clearer by a freer use of punctuation.

These and other stylistic elements are better observed and discovered by a direct experience with the texts themselves.

4. THE MEDITATIONS REFLECT THE EXPERIENCES OF THE AUTHOR.

I have already stressed the fact that in order to really understand the Meditations it is necessary to read them against the background of the life of the author and the events which brought into existence the religious family of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, composed entirely of lay Religious who are totally committed to the ministry of Christian Education. It is the key to a very interesting and profitable reading experience because it is these Meditations which best reflect the autobiography of the Founder. On many pages, besides the objective development of the theme, we can sense the strong stirrings of life in a man and the coursing of events in the special vocation which was his.

The Meditations are not so much the result of study and sporadic thought done at the table in his room, but rather they are a faithful mirror of situations and states of soul, of experiences which constitute the Providentially planned spiritual paths of the Founder and the life of Faith by which he discerned them.

Sauvage-Campos (op. cit. p. 31) insist on this autobiographical element and even include events which preceded the work of founding the Christian Schools: «As we try to unveil the intimacy of his relations with God, the only facts we have are all posterior to his definitive commitment to the work of the Schools. However, many passages from the meditations on the Saints lead us to believe that his youth, his education, his priestly vocation contained a rather precocious experience of God as a compelling presence and an invitation to give himself entirely to Him.» They cite as examples Med. 122.1, 177.1, 180.2, 98.1, 186.1...

However, the evidence of an on-going experience is very clear in the happenings which characterize his work as a Founder and his day by day relationships with others and with the realities of life, of virtue, of spiritual values, etc.

Only by reading carefully from this point of view can we come to realize the continual interplay between spiritual teachings and daily experiences. Bookishness and theoretical considerations are very rare.

A few examples may help to clarify all this. Consider the teachings and advice of the Founder in the following areas which were very much a part of the way he experienced life.

- An unwavering fidelity to God in difficult situations and persecutions.
- seeing all things from the point of view of Faith.
- The importance of seeking counsel and a personal examination of the issues before taking a decision.
- love of solitude and uneasiness concerning honors.
- Intense prayer life.
- Personal poverty and a tender love for the poor.
- Austerity and the practice of penance.
- Absolute submission to the Church.
- Kindness toward his Brothers.
- Zeal for the instruction and salvation of students.

The list could continue...

The list of themes might be of some help in discovering this path throughout the 208 meditations.

There is so much of the man woven into his meditations that I feel there is no exaggeration in saying that the Meditations are really his spiritual autobiography.

This is the first key to understanding the real meaning of the text. The second, which is just as important, is **to understand and be aware of the basic outline of his main spiritual ideas**, in order to identify and appreciate the individual teachings as they occur in the course of the Meditations.

This must be the backdrop against which the multiplicity of comments on Gospel passages and the lives of the Saints must be seen to appreciate their unity, because of themselves they appear episodic and unrelated.

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(1) These quotations have recently been the object of intensive study. It reveals that the author had a deep knowledge of the Bible and an extraordinary familiarity with the authors of the Sacred Texts:

M. Sauvage. "les citations néotestamentaires dans les Méditations pour le Temps de la Retraite" (C. L. I, 1959).

M. Campos. "L'itinéraire évangélique de S. J. B. de La Salle et le recours à l'Écriture dans ses Méditations pour le temps de la retraite" (C. L. 45-46, 1974).

L. Varela. "Biblia y espiritualidad en San Juan Bautista de La Salle". (Salamanca, 1966).

S. Scaglione. "Le citazioni dei Padri e degli Scrittori sacri nelle Meditazioni" (Rivista Lasalliana 1/1967).