

**TOWARDS A RENEWED  
DISCOVERY OF  
ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE**

**(3)  
A BODY OF TEACHING  
THAT CONTINUES TO GUIDE (1/2)**

**Br. Mario Presciuttini**

The Founder never thought of writing a work which would outline his thinking and teaching in an organised and systematic way. He was not a theoretician, nor one to draw up texts which considered and planned practical action.

His numerous writings spring from life itself and are concerned with life: the spiritual formation of the Brothers, educational organisation and guidelines, texts for the use of students... Practical problems lead him to take up his pen.

However, he must have had a very extensive remote preparation and an exceptional ability to synthesise, when we think that he produced his voluminous writings during free moments in a very busy and full life, made up of journeys, foundations, organisation, unforeseen occurrences and...long hours spent in prayer.

Obviously in the present article I shall restrict myself to outlining a few essential points of reference to help the Lasallians of today to understand the central teaching of the Founder. Other topics, in spite of their importance, will have to remain in the background.

**3.1 The context of his teaching**

As De La Salle was not a writer by profession he did not set much store by trying to be "original" in the superficial sense of the word. He made great use of worthwhile ideas, whatever their origin, but he arranged them in a very original synthesis that was his own and which reflected his aims for writing.

The earlier parts of this article were published in the following leaflets:

1st part: 22-6-A-94 and 22-7-A-95  
2nd part: 23-1-A-99 and 23-2-A-100

The unitary nature of educational problems with all their ramifications, around which his whole life and thinking revolved, provided him with a filter and the key to an understanding of schools of thought, literary works, conversations, personal studies, from which he drew his inspiration.

G. Rigault's judgment on this point is clear and valid: «*De La Salle does not in any way try to be completely original. If he does become so, it is because of his rare ability to synthesise, his speed of assimilation, his practical approach which is the art of adaptation, all of which brought him to great heights of asceticism and mysticism. On this level he is a match for the great masters. He is no longer a pupil of any of them. By means of a new religious family, quite different from those that preceded it, he created a spirituality that has a special slant and a characteristic form and expression.*» (1)

Although a Sulpician by training and outlook, his interests range over the whole cultural scene of the time: he owes much to the Carmelites, to Jesuit and Minim writers, to St. Francis de Sales, to Roland and Barre, etc.

As regards pedagogy, his "Conduct of Schools" presupposes a study of Vives, Comenio, Fourier, Roland, Demia, the "Parish School", etc.

In writing his "catechisms" he based himself at least on that of the Council of Trent, Joly, Le Coreur, Godet de Marais (2)...

I mention all this simply because, when we come to study De La Salle's writings, we must not forget the historical context of his thinking and the cultural and spiritual sources from which he draws his inspiration.

We should point out, however, a special characteristic of De La Salle which reveals the extent of his present-day relevance: his familiarity with and constant reference to the Bible, which constitutes his primary and fundamental source (3), especially to the Gospel and St. Paul, on whose theology the "Meditations for the Time of Retreat" are extensively based. Even patristics play an important role (4).

**3.2 The basic principles  
of his spiritual teaching**

A particularly rich source of this are the three series of "Meditations" (5) and other works of an ascetic or spiritual nature.

Basically, his teachings revolve around two major ideas:

## (a) The spirit of faith

The Founder constantly speaks of the spirit of faith which should lead us to see everything in the light of revelation which we come to know through meditation and the constant use of Holy Scripture.

This teaching which is constantly reaffirmed, in particular with regard to its practical consequences for spiritual attitudes, is a reflection of his own experience.

He teaches his followers especially:

### – total self-abandonment to God and willing acceptance of his plan.

«I leave it to Divine Providence to make the first move and then I am satisfied. When it is clear that I am acting only under the direction of Providence, I have nothing to reproach myself with. When I make the first move, it is only I myself who am active, so I don't expect to see much good result; neither does God usually give the action his special blessing.» In these words written to Br. Gabriel Drolin (6) we have a good summary of a fundamental attitude which the Founder had adopted when he wrote his "personal plan" and which he had faithfully kept: «I shall always look upon the work of my salvation and the establishment and direction of our community as the work of God: that is why I shall entrust them to his care so as not to do anything in it that concerns me except on his orders; and I shall frequently consult him about what I should do with regard to the one and to the other; and I shall often repeat the words of the prophet Habakkuk, "Domine, opus tuum" (7).

### – The transformation of every action into an act of faith

I have already mentioned the Founder's basic principle of making no distinction between the duties of one's state and the work of one's salvation.

His teaching in this regard offers a rich unifying principle in life, especially for those whose daily work is not obviously "sacred" or "spiritual". According to him, we must change our way of looking at all facets of our life.

To develop these two viewpoints De La Salle indicates at least four main approaches which return again and again in all his writings:

- \* **be willing to enter into a relationship with God:** mental prayer or meditation is a time especially conducive to this;
- \* **nourish oneself with the Word of God:** in particular with that of the Gospel whose "maxims" have to be assimilated in

order to be able to nourish oneself with "the Christian spirit" (cf. Med 159,1);

\* **live in the presence of God:** make every moment of the day part of a relationship. This is even a specific "exercise" which should be frequently repeated.

\* **purify motives: this means** to live according to the Spirit, or in typically Lasallian language, to act "by the movement of the Spirit". Are the true motives behind choices and actions clearly consistent and in harmony with the spirit of faith?

Up till now we have been speaking of a vertical relationship with God, but De La Salle does not believe that holiness is completely achieved in this way: he insists always on practical application involving one's neighbour: "*Faith is like that: if good works do not go with it, it is quite dead*" (Jm 2, 17). This is a text much quoted by De La Salle (8).

«It would be useless for Christians to have the faith and to believe the eternal truths which Jesus Christ came to proclaim and which the Church preaches if their faith was not enlivened by charity and accompanied by good works...» (9).

The horizontal relationship is the indispensable complement to the spirit of faith. The Founder calls it the spirit of zeal.

## References

- (1) G. Rigault, "Histoire generale de l'Institut, vol.1. p.466
- (2) For these various connections. see Gallego, Vol II. pp.14-17. For the catechism in particular. cf. J. Pungier. "J.B.de La Salle: Le message de son catechisme". Rome 1984.
- (3) A statistical curiosity: A. Roche has tried to count the number of biblical quotations in De La Salle's writings. There are 899 quotations from the O.T. and of these 222 are from the psalms. 3972 come from the N.T. Of these 1165 come from the Letters of St. Paul. and 1732 from the Synoptic writers. (Archives. Generalate. BL 500.
- (4) Cf. Secondino Scaglione, "Le citazioni dei Padri e degli Scrittori sacri nelle Meditazioni". Rivista Lasalliana 1/1967.
- (5) Especially because at the present moment. it is the only complete text available in Italian. Of the other writings there exist partial translations and anthologies: "Come Cristo", "Educatori come Cristo", "Invito alla preghiera", "Proposta educativa". all produced by Secondino Scaglione. For the Meditations, see Rivista Lasalliana 1/1990, pp.15-46.
- (6) Letter 18. August 28th 1705
- (7) CL 8. p.319. The first edition seems to be that of 1686. The consistency should be noted between it and the preceding letter of 1705.
- (8) Quoted verbatim either in "Devoirs d'un Chrétien" (CL 20. p.90) or in various Meditations (84. 3: 175. 2: 197. 2: 200. 3) and in paraphrase form on numerous occasions.
- (9) "Devoirs d'un Chrétien". CL 20. p.89.