

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

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

Br. Mario Presciuttini

#### (b) The spirit of zeal

This is none other than the spirit of faith in action. It is collaborating with God in his plan of salvation, motivated by charity.

The Founder's teaching on this is very rich and dense in consequences. I shall try to trace out its fundamental characteristics:

#### ● The root: the call from God

«The zeal that inspires you is meant to give you these dispositions, recognising that it is God who has called you, who has chosen you for this ministry, and who has sent you to work in his vineyard. Fulfil your ministry, then, with all the affection of your heart, working entirely for him» (Med 201, 1). This is the "ministerial" dimension of Christian life seen by De La Salle as rooted in baptism and sharing in the life of the Mystical Body.

#### ● The model: Jesus

A model understood in two complementary ways:

– as a model for life: it is necessary to meditate and relive his "mysteries" (cf. in particular the "Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer", part 2), retracing the Gospel journey of self-abasement, service, brotherhood, self-offering undertaken by Jesus (Ph 2, 5). Cf. also Med. 91, 2; 102, 2; 103, 1; 195, 3...

– as a model for the apostolic life: we must always follow Jesus the "Master"; his way of acting, both in "spirit" and in "action", is the model for Lasallian zeal. Cf. Med. 33; 199, 2; 200, 2; 203, 1...

#### ● The model framework: the primitive christian community

The Founder constantly refers to the Apostles, to St. Paul, to the dynamics of call/mission seen in the Acts of the Apostles, to guide the thinking and actions of Lasallians. In this case also he does this under two linked and interdependent aspects:

- "to be one heart and soul": Med. 39, 3; 91, 2; 113, 2..
- to be aware of the "mission" and full of zeal to fulfil it: Med. 43, 3; 199, 2,3...

#### ● The area of commitment: educational needs

The educational option, which I have already mentioned, is seen by De La Salle as something exclusive, complete, full and rewarding for the Lasallian. It would be pointless to give quotations as these are to be found on almost every page of his writings. He insists in particular on the need:

- to keep one's eyes open, to be alert and available;
- to have a clear hierarchy of "educational priorities": poverty, Christian education, "touching hearts", education of the individual, etc.
- to respond to present-day religious, social and cultural needs (cf. Med. 160, 3).
- to "honour" the educational ministry and to live it in full (cf. Med. 199, 3).

It was the Founder's constant and deep concern that the "schools should run well"; and what gave him pleasure (cf. Letters 75, 8; 58, 20) was not so much the satisfaction of seeing well-organised establishments, as noting that the work of God was being done efficiently.

#### ● The place where this is carried out: the educational community

Zeal can be exercised only in the context of and from within a "community". On this point too, Lasallian teaching is precise and clear. There is no doubt that De La Salle established a community based on a form of religious life, but it was one that was clearly orientated towards its specific apostolic aims. In his eyes, apostolic work is at the same time the reason for the existence of the community and its aim: the sanctification of its members is not secondary but it comes about through the apostolate (10).

#### ● The conditions: preparation and example

He insists equally on both these aspects:

- \* Zeal demands a constantly improving preparation: "Ignorance in such matters would be criminal" (Med. 153, 1).
- \* Zeal requires that what is taught is "demonstrated": "you should teach more by example than by words" (Med. 69, 1). "Example makes a much greater impression on the mind and heart than words" (Med. 203, 3).

### ● The motive force: love

It is said that for the Founder faith is incomplete without charity. However, for him, this charity is not a general feeling for everyone and no one: it is love for God and tender and strong love for those specific brothers to whom God sends me, especially the very poor and lonely ones. For him and for the first Brothers these were specifically the children of the common people: the Irish exiles, boarders, the delinquents or prisoners of St. Yon (11), young workers, lay teachers for the country, the Huguenot children (12)...without discrimination. For each category there is the same love, the same total service, more tender for those most in need of it.

*«Have you similar sentiments of charity and tenderness towards the poor children whom you have to instruct? Do you avail yourself of the affection the children have for you to attract them to God? If you show the firmness of a father in withdrawing them from evil, you should also show the tenderness of a mother in gathering them together, and in doing them all the good in your power»* (Med. 101, 3).

### ● The aim: the glory of God and the salvation of man

Zeal is directed towards two precise and complementary goals: while serving God, we save man; while working for man, we show love for God.

\* *"Since by your state you are the ministers of God, you must cooperate with him and enter into his designs to bring about the salvation of those children for whom you are responsible, and, in particular, of those who are most inclined to wickedness"* (Med. 56, 1).

\* *"You are not only the ministers of God, but also of Jesus Christ and of the Church...You must have the love and glory of God as your single aim in teaching these children"* (Med. 201, 2). Then he immediately adds: *"Since your ministry has for its purpose to procure the salvation of souls, the first concern you must have is to procure this goal as far as you are able"* (Med. 201, 3).

In spite of many omissions because of the limitations and particular slant of this article, I feel that at least the general outline is sufficiently clear.

\*\*\*

The question we have to ask now is: in what sense is this teaching of the Founder relevant for the Lasallians of today?

Certainly not in the sense that what he writes constitutes a ready-made and complete formula to deal with present-day problems, dispensing us from the demands of creative fidelity and personal responsibility.

But it is certainly relevant as a criterion for living according to the Lasallian ideal in our days: it has lost none of its ability to inspire.

In our days, reference to the Founder makes sense if we consider side-by-side our experience and our lives with his life and his message. Certainly the two great principles of the **spirit of faith** and of the **spirit of zeal** constitute solid teaching on which religious life and apostolic work can be validly based in our times.

In particular, the **rediscovery of an awareness of God**, the **re-injection of spiritual values into community undertakings**, **life-giving contact with the Word of God** and the **renewal of apostolic zeal** are so many milestones that mark out our road for us: a road that not only is not outmoded, but that leads to a constructive future of hope and new undertakings.

Is not the teaching of the Founder more relevant than the many shaky and comfortable positions that we run the risk of adopting?

Brothers, Lay Teachers, Parents, Former students, Members of Signum Fidei, Friends, Young People...in this teaching we can find a message that is valid for one and all: how to be Lasallians in the particular circumstances in which each one of us lives.

### CONCLUSION

*"In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus..."* (Ph. 2, 5) says St. Paul as he begins his great Christological hymn in which he traces out Jesus' journey of self-abasement, service, gift of self and glorification.

Having considered the life and teachings of our Father and Founder, I do not think it would be irreverent to apply these same words to him, for he followed the journey traced out by Jesus in an exemplary fashion.

To call ourselves Lasallians means that all of us, Brothers and friends, accept a demanding commitment. The title cannot simply be a label or name without meaning. It implies **assimilating a spirit**, a process of learning that never ends, the **adoption of a lifestyle** that is never complete.

We have a model that fortunately is becoming more and more known and more deeply loved.

Our task is to discover him, to meet him more frequently, as individuals, as a community and as members of the Lasallian Family. I think the time has come when we can apply to the latter the words the Founder wrote speaking of the Institute: *"Thank God every day, through Jesus Christ Our Lord, that he has been pleased to establish this benefit and to give this support to the Church. Pray to him fervently, too, that he will be pleased to make your Institute grow and bear fruit day by day, so that, as St. Paul says, the hearts of the faithful may be strengthened in holiness and in justice"* (Med. 207, 3).

### References

(10) On these aspects. cf. **Sauvage**, "Catechèse et laïcat", pp.493-511.

(11) During the life of the Founder, the work of St. Yon in Rouen was an pedagogical and apostolic endeavour which was admirable in its complexity, originality, its organisational ability and daring. The complex housed at one and the same time and in complete harmony: the novitiate of the Brothers: the boarding school for normal and delinquent students with a suitable programme of studies: the "prison" for young people condemned to a rehabilitation course...and the parish school in which the novices did teaching practice. Cf. **Gallego**, Vol I, pp.396-402 and 532-533; **Merlaud**, pp.153-159.

(12) The school at Alès and others in central France were genuine missionary schools in a Protestant area, where the Brothers had to give proof of exceptional teaching ability and educational patience.