

**POVERTY, THE PATH TO SANCTITY
IN THE FOOTSTEPS
OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE
(1/2)**

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**Introduction.
The Lasallian way is based on faith**

Any consideration of the present topic - Poverty, the path to sanctity in the footsteps of St. John Baptist de La Salle - must begin with the following observation: **faith** enlightened by the **Word of God** is of the utmost importance. This is evident from the 1705 Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools:

"The spirit of this Institute is first a spirit of faith which should induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God, always entering into these sentiments of Job: 'The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; as it has pleased the Lord, so it is done', and into other similar sentiments so often expressed in Holy Scripture and uttered by the Patriarchs of old." (CR II; Jb 1,21)

- The words of Job, the man who lost vast riches, who meditates on the problem of evil and finally puts all his trust in God:

"I know that you are all-powerful: what you conceive, you can perform. I am the man who obscured your designs with my empty-headed words...I knew you then only by hearsay; but now, having seen you with my own eyes..." (Jb 42,2,3,5).

- The words of Job, therefore, are the basis for the whole of St La Salle's life of faith. Those who knew him remarked on how often he would use the old patriarch's words: "God be blessed!". Although he did not include them in chapter II of the Rule he had recourse to them whenever he encountered difficulties, and that was often.

His last words before dying on Good Friday, April 7th 1719, reflect those of Job in the midst of his sufferings and those of Jesus in Gethsemani:

"I adore in all things the will of God in my regard".

"Yahweh gave, Yahweh has taken back. Blessed be the name of Yahweh!" (Jb 1,21) said Job. And Jesus said: *"Father...let your will be done, not mine"* (Lk 22,42).

- Poverty has no meaning except in the light of faith or, as Pascal said, "in the order of grace", which is to say the same thing.

- As we read Job, the psalms (which nourished the prayer life of the Holy Family) and the Gospels, we see the deve-

lopment of a distinction between **poverty of the heart** and all forms of **material poverty**.

Whenever Jesus cured the sick - the blind, the deaf, the paralysed and the mute - most often it was to enable these men and women to take up once again their activities in society. Begging is sometimes a necessary evil, but it is never desirable and those reduced to it should give it up as soon as possible.

- This distinction can be found in the first Beatitude which opens Jesus' first discourse on the Kingdom of God in both Matthew and Luke.

In Matthew we read: *"How happy are the poor in spirit; theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven"* (Mt 5,3). Luke is briefer and more direct: *"How happy are you who are poor: yours is the Kingdom of God"* (Lk 6,20).

It is interesting to note that these two evangelists are the only ones to report Jesus' prayer to his Father which is perhaps the clearest statement of his thinking about poverty:

"I bless you, Father, Lord of Heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children" (Mt 11,25; Lk 10,21).

The same two evangelists refer often to these "mere children", and Matthew, 4 verses after Jesus' prayer, reports the Master's appeal to his disciples: "Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart" (Mt 11,29).

We should note also that Matthew and Luke are the evangelists who report, each in his own but complementary way, the birth of Jesus in humility and in poverty touching on destitution, his childhood and adolescence in the house of Joseph, the manual worker.

- St La Salle never tired of returning in his writings to the mystery of the Incarnation which was so dear to the French school of spirituality to which he belonged. To conclude this introduction, we can quote a text of St La Salle which Fr. Deville, the Superior of St Sulpice, calls "truly Bérullian" in his introduction. It is an extract from the Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer in which the Founder of the Brothers gives his disciples not only a method but also examples of prayer:

"I unite myself to you, divine Jesus, Infant-God, with a great desire to share in the spirit of your holy infancy, in your dispositions and in the grace you won for me in the mystery of your birth. I beg you very humbly, dear Infant Jesus, to draw me close to your divine heart, to unite me to your Holy Spirit and to the dispositions you had in the stable at Bethlehem, lying in the manger on hay and straw, or in the arms of your blessed Mother. I beg you to share with me the sentiments and feelings of humility, docility, submissiveness and obedience that you had for your heavenly Father, your holy Mother and your foster father, the great Saint Joseph. Through your grace, Lord, may I have these sentiments towards those who have the right to my obedience. May I be even ready and disposed to submit myself with simplicity to all sorts of persons in imitation of you."

"Make me share fully, I beg you, Lord, your holy attachment to poverty, mortification and suffering. May I love them and practise them through sentiments of faith, in union with your spirit and dispositions and by the inspiration and effects of your holy grace working and acting in me. I promise you that I shall cooperate with it to the best of my ability."

"Help me with your great power, I beg you, my good Saviour, because I am weak. Make me become a new creature in you, so that I no longer live and act as the child of sinful man, but as a child of God, reborn and adopted in you by the eternal Father. Mark me, Lord, as a seal marks wax, so that I may be in you and you may be truly and effectively in me. May I no longer live in me and by me, but in you and by you, so that it is you who live and act in me."

Give me, Lord, your spirit as a child, so that I may have the confidence to say to God, in union with you: Abba, Father!" (CL 14, EMO, pp. 84-86. Deville: L'Ecole française de spiritualité, p. 134).

THREE STAGES IN THE LASALLIAN PATH TO SANCTITY

In the path to sanctity followed by St La Salle I shall stress three stages which seem particularly important to me, and which are linked to events which led him to embrace poverty in a radical way:

1. The death of his parents (1671-1672)
2. His "conversion" to the poor (1682-1686)
3. His "night of the soul" (1711-1714)

Each of these stages involves the same renunciation. In the second it is more material, while in the other two it is more affective. All three lead St La Salle to the final accomplishment of the wish expressed in his prayer to the Infant Jesus:

"May I no longer live in me and by me, but in you and by you, so that it is you who live and act in me".

Is not this what we call in Christian terminology sanctity?

1. The death of his parents

As the eldest of 11 children, John Baptist de La Salle saw one of his sisters and three of his brothers die at an early age. It was the kind of thing that happened in those days. It is said that, when these deaths occurred in families with numerous children, faith was so strong that they caused only momentary pain to parents and children. I wonder if this was really true. Can it be true that the sensitive and thoughtful eldest De La Salle son was not upset at the age of 6 by the death of Marie Anne, at the age of 12, by that of Jean Louis (the first of this name) and at the age of 17 by that of Simon whose death certificate he co-signed with his father on April 26th 1669?

Two years later, when he was studying at the seminary of St Sulpice, he learnt of the sudden death of his mother on July 21st 1671, at the age of 37 years and 8 months. Nine months later, his father died at the age of 46 and a half, after two days' sickness in bed, leaving 7 orphans the youngest of which was only 20 months old. The news took nine days to reach Paris. It took John Baptist only three to return to Rheims and take over as guardian of his brothers and sisters in accordance with Louis de La Salle's wishes expressed in the will he had written the day before he died.

The death of his father was a harsh blow at a time when John Baptist was still grieving over the death of his mother.

It was a harsh blow which made the 21 year old seminarist ask himself some serious questions about his future. The determination and competence with which he took over the running of his family were exemplary, but the two deaths in quick succession must have been a cruel loss for this loving son. It was a cruel blow too for this seminarist who saw that the vocation to the priesthood which he had cherished since early childhood would never now be fulfilled.

"Yahweh has given, Yahweh has taken back. Blessed be the name of Yahweh".

However, with the support of the saintly Canon Roland, his spiritual director, John Baptist soon resumed his studies for the priesthood and, at the age of 26, was ordained in Rheims cathedral on Holy Saturday, April 9th 1678.

One could say that the sudden deaths of his parents within 9 months of each other, which affected him so deeply, prepared him for the events which would give his life a direction hitherto unforeseen. By removing the two most solid supports of his youth, God prepared him in his usual powerful way for the new forms of renunciation he was going to require of him.

"If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself..." (Mt 16,24).

2. "Conversion" to the poor

There is a sentence in St La Salle's meditation for the feast of St Norbert, the 12th century founder of the Premonstratensians, which describes the most spectacular and most decisive stage of his path to sanctity:

"The Spirit of God with which this Saint was animated led him to renounce his benefices, to sell his family inheritance and to distribute the proceeds to the poor" (Med 132, 2).

Blain wrote as follows:

"It was the same Spirit of God that made this other canon, who was 28 years old, devote himself to the service of poor children and their teachers, an adventure he could never have foreseen. A few lines taken from a memorandum written a few years after the events I have described will give some insight into the man's feelings and show how God acted towards him. He wrote:

'It was on account of these two events - the meeting with Monsieur Nyel and the suggestion made by that lady - that I began to look after the boys' schools.

'I had not given it any previous thought. It is not as if it had not been suggested to me. Several of Monsieur Roland's friends had tried to suggest it to me, but I never took the matter seriously. It never occurred to me to act on it. If I had ever thought that the care I was taking of the teachers out of pure charity would lead me to be obliged to live with them, I would have dropped everything at once. As I quite naturally considered those I employed in the schools, especially at the beginning, as inferior to my valet, the very thought of having to live with them would have been unbearable for me. I suffered a great deal at the beginning when I invited them to live with me. This lasted two years.'" (Blain I, p.69)

There follows St La Salle's description of the workings of the Spirit of God:

'It was apparently for this reason that God, who directs all things with wisdom and gentleness, and who is not accustomed to force man's will, wishing me to take complete charge of the schools, did so in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time, in such a way that one commitment led me to another, without my having planned any of this at the beginning.'

The road on which St La Salle set out was not the road to Damascus with its flash of blinding light, the fall from the horse, voices from heaven, although the citizens of Rheims may have thought so, judging by some of the spectacular decisions he was to take. Quite simply, and in a way much closer to our own experience, he discerned events by prayer and by consulting a spiritual director who also was filled with the Spirit of God.