

**From the Meditations
of St. John Baptist de La Salle**

**SOME ASPECTS
OF HIS MARIAN DOCTRINE
(1/3)**

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Note: All references to the Meditations are taken from *De La Salle: Meditations*, ed. by W.J. Battersby, Ph.D. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1953. The numbering system, however, is that used in the French edition of 1922 (Paris: Procure Générale, cinquième édition), since most works based on these writings that have been published since that date have followed the numbering system established by that edition of the *Meditations*. (See CL 12.)

In his meditation for the Feast of the Holy Name of Mary, De La Salle told his disciples: "*The road you have to follow here below is so perilous that you need a guide to enable you to keep to it safely. You cannot find a better one than the Most Blessed Virgin...*" (164:2) And again in the same meditation the Saint wrote: "*It is not enough to travel safely, we must reach our destination... Mary, the bright star of the sea, will guide you safely thither.*" (164:3) In turn, these statements might explain why in his meditation for the Feast of Our Lady of the Snow he insisted, "... *And whereas our devotion to the saints is manifested on certain days and at certain seasons, that which we have for Our Lady must be continual...*" (151:3) So, in an age when Jansenism was quite prevalent and very strong, (See among others, Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. by J.J. Buckingham. Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1965, II, 257, 259, ff., and W.J. Battersby, *De La Salle: Saint and Spiritual Writer*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950. 100 - 103) the holy priest was at once outstanding for his advocacy of devotion to the Mother of God, well known for his practice of this devotion, and very desirous of sharing it with those under his influence. To achieve this latter goal, he did not just urge his disciples to develop this devotion and then encourage them to practice it by his example. In addition, in several of his writings he tried to provide them with a doctrinal basis for devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin. And one place in which he wrote at some length on this subject was his *Meditations pour dimanches et fêtes, or Meditations for Sundays and Feasts*.

This relatively lengthy work of the Founder was first published in 1731, some twelve years after his death. Of the 186 authentic meditations by De La Salle found in this collection, some 21 contain significant references to the Most Blessed Virgin, and taken together their contents do much to provide his disciples with an interesting and thought provoking doc-

trinal basis for their Marian devotion. And if 12 of these meditations contain only brief mention of Our Lady, the other nine deal almost exclusively with Mary's life or with Marian devotion. From the point of view of their contents then, most of these 21 meditations could be described as "historical" – in a very loose sense of this term – or "traditional" – since they repeat what Catholics had long believed about Mary, whether it was found in the New Testament or it was a common belief of the faithful. However, two of these meditations are exclusively exhortatory, giving reasons why the Brothers should have a devotion to Mary or showing them the advantages of such a devotion, while at least five others also contain significant amounts of what can be termed exhortatory material.

In some ways, the original edition of this work showed the influence of the time in which it was written. Thus the Founder's meditations for Sundays followed the calendar of the liturgical year, which begins with the First Sunday of Advent, and those for the Principal Feasts followed the calendar of the civil year, which begins on 1 January. As a result, his "historical" or "traditional" meditations do not present the life of Mary in a chronological order, but in the order set by the liturgical and civil calendars. Still they do provide significant amounts of information regarding Mary and her role in God's plan for the salvation of the human race. Primarily this was done in the seven meditations written for feasts commemorating some principal events in her life, such as her Immaculate Conception, (82) the annunciation, (112) and her Assumption. (156) Then he supplemented this information in six others dealing with events of the life of Jesus in which Mary was involved in a special way, or in five others written for the feasts of Saints with whom Mary had had some special relations.

Before going into Mary's life as presented in these meditations of De La Salle, it might be appropriate to make two more points. In a sense the Saint seemed to go out of his way to find reasons to compose meditations dealing with the Most Blessed Virgin, and not missing any chance to do so. A good example of this would be his meditation on the Immaculate Conception, a feast only recently extended to the universal Church by Pope Clement XI (1708). Another example can be seen in what is perhaps his most beautiful Marian meditation, the one for the Holy Name of Mary, and one of his two exclusively exhortatory meditations. Once again this was a feast of very recent origin, having been established by Pope Innocent XI (1676-89) to commemorate the Christian victory over the Turks outside Vienna in 1683. (*De La Salle: Meditations*, ed. by W.J. Battersby, Ph.D. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1953, 429, 357.) In some ways these two meditations show how strong was the Founder's devotion to Mary and how anxious he was to lead others to honor the Mother of God.

In the *Recueil*, when writing about the virtue of "Faith," De La Salle had admonished his disciples, "... *Hold fast to what is of faith, shun novelties, follow the traditions of the Church, believe only what she believes, ... approve what she approves....*" (*A Collection of Various Short Treatises*, by John Baptist de La Salle. New York: La Salle Bureau, 128.) His zeal to make Mary known and loved did not lead the Saint to ignore his own directive in this matter. When introducing the meditation for the Nativity of the Most Blessed Virgin, Battersby wrote, "*In this Meditation De La Salle took his inspiration from the liturgy of the feast ...*" (*De La Salle: Meditations*, 355) The same could have been said regarding a number of the other Marian meditations, as a perusal of their contents would quickly show. However, at the same time the holy priest continued to show himself to be a man of his time. In his discussion of the Founder's meditation for the Presentation of the Most Blessed Virgin, Battersby wrote. "*According to tradition, the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, while still a child, was solemnly offered to God in the Temple*

of Jerusalem by her parents, ..." Then Battersby added that pious and learned authors of the past asserted both that Mary, already endowed with the use of reason at this time, had then made a vow of perpetual virginity, and that after this she lived in the Temple as one of a group of maidens, very similar to nuns in a convent. But he also said that this latter idea "finds little support among modern biblical scholars." (*De La Salle: Meditations*, 414) And this could be a good example of how the Founder accepted and followed, but did not rise above, ideas widely held in his day – including ones no longer accepted by us.

The material contained in some 18 of De La Salle's Marian meditations presents a rather complete account of the life of the Virgin as set down in the Gospel story and as developed by Catholic tradition. Anne and Joachim are named as the parents of Mary. They are described as having been well along in years at the time of the birth of their daughter who is depicted as being the child of their prayers. (146: 2; 157:2) Also, this event is a good example of what the Founder terms in his *Méthode d'Oraison* a mystery of our religion, that is an event in the life of Jesus, his Mother, or some Saint which is related to our salvation. As regards these mysteries, he did not want the Brothers to concentrate only on their external events, but to go deeper into what happened, thus penetrating themselves with what he called "the spirit of the mystery." By this he meant what God seeks to teach us through the events as well as the virtues he wants us to develop and to practice because of what we perceive being done by him, his most Blessed Mother, or the Saints. (Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, *Explication de la Méthode d'Oraison*. Paris: À la Maisson Mère, 1890. p. 70)

From the story of the parents of Mary, the holy priest wanted the Brothers to learn a form of "spiritual parenthood." Citing the example of Joachim, he said, God "...destines you to be the spiritual father of the children whom you instruct... you are called to engender children in Christ, and also to make Jesus live anew in their hearts..." (157:1) And basing himself on the story of Anne, he wrote,

God who has chosen you to make Him known to others, wishes that you should impress the idea of the Most Blessed Virgin on the hearts of those whom you instruct, by inculcating a tender devotion towards her. This will be the fruit... of the zeal you show in your teaching to make her loved by others. (146:2)

For the Founder, prayer was always to lead to practical action in the apostolate.

God, having destined the Most Blessed Virgin from all eternity to be the Mother of His Son, so formed her both in soul and body that she might be worthy of containing Him in her womb.... As it would have been a disgraceful thing for the Mother of God to have been stained by sin, God by a special privilege, exempted her from Original Sin... (82:1)

Thus De La Salle took a stand in favor of Mary's Immaculate Conception, which was neither an article of faith nor universally accepted in his time. Then he added:

Not only was Mary preserved from Original Sin in her conception, but she received grace in such abundance at that moment that she was preserved from all actual sin also ... (82:2)

and

God, in making Mary perfectly pure..., also preserved her from concupiscence, that is ... from all inclination to evil... (82:3)

However, he did not stop with describing and detailing the special privileges which the child of Joachim and Anne enjoyed from the first moment of her existence, in view of the role God had designed for her in the work of human

salvation. One who acknowledges these favors given to Mary, he said, should honor her as "the purest of all creatures." (82:1,2) But he also called upon his readers to enter into the spirit of this mystery by beseeching her "to obtain from the Lord that you may be wholly freed from the corruption of the world during your life, ... (82:1) For him, this was the way and the only way in which his disciples could give this great mystery real meaning in their lives.

For De La Salle, Mary was important first and foremost as the one through whom Jesus would come into the world, and her birth was celebrated only because it meant that soon the Saviour would come and human Redemption would be accomplished. (163:1) Because of the role assigned her by God, she was adorned with an "abundance of grace." And on her part, "Mary corresponded with all the graces which God favored her with from the time of her birth." To do this, she began by adoring him as her God and then consecrated herself entirely to him, to live for him alone and to serve him all her life. (163:2,3) However, Mary did not receive this abundance of grace just for herself. By this grace she became a refuge for all humans redeemed by her Son. And she is both willing and able to "bestow a portion (of this grace) on those who have recourse to her." Therefore, the Saint encouraged his disciples to pray to her so as "to profit by the advantage you may gain from her intercession." (163:2,3) In this way De La Salle indicated that just as God had decreed that Jesus would come into this world through Mary, so also it was his plan that grace be given to men through her intercession.

In his meditations on St. Anne (146) and St. Joachim (157), the holy priest described how the parents of the Most Blessed Virgin regarded her above all as a gift from God, a gift they wanted to return to him by presenting her to him in the temple at Jerusalem as soon as was possible. (146:3; 157:3) On her part, Mary joined her offering of herself to God along with that made by her parents, and, in the words of the Founder, she "consecrated herself to God" and "gave herself entirely ... and without reserve" to him. And he adds that it was "on this day ... she made a vow of perpetual chastity. ... (191:1,2) Her purpose in making this offering, he said, was to withdraw from earthly things so that she could love God and serve him alone. Thus would she make herself completely pleasing to God so that she could worthily fulfill the mission for which God had created her, by becoming a suitable instrument in his hands. (191:1,2,3) Then the Saint reminded his disciples that they like Mary were called to bring God to others. So through her intercession, and in imitation of her conduct in this mystery, they were to ask God to make them suitable instruments for doing his work, individuals "well disposed to receive the word of God and to communicate it to others, ... (191:3)

In a sense all the events mentioned so far only led up to and prepared for the mystery of the Annunciation. For it was at this time that Mary became the Mother of God, which De La Salle described as a "sublime honor" and "the greatest favor that could possibly be bestowed upon a created being." Among other things, the Saint insisted it was Mary's "faith which merited for her this privilege." But while he admired and praised the Virgin in her practice of this virtue, he also called attention to the humility she showed on this occasion. For he said:

"... Still, this great favor only serves to increase her humility. While the angel tells her that she is the Mother of God, and honors her as such, this admirable Virgin calls herself simply 'the handmaid of the Lord.'" (Lk 1:38)

For their part, the Brothers were called upon to profit from the example of Mary in this mystery by imitating the humility she showed in this event. (112:1)