

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

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

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However, all these things just mentioned seem simply to lead to other, and for the Founder, more important ideas regarding Mary. In all these meditations the Saint repeatedly stressed how the Most Blessed Virgin was chosen by God in a special way. The reason for this choice, he asserted, was so that she could play an important, not to say essential, role in God's plan to redeem the human race through his Son Jesus Christ. In keeping with this idea, a number of times and in different ways, he insisted that just as God gave us Jesus through Mary, he also desires to bring us to share in this redemption through the mother of his Son, who is also our Heavenly Mother. For, if while on earth and during the life of her son, she was the channel of God's grace, so now is she the one through whom humans receive the redeeming grace merited for them by her son. And, at the same time, he said that her God-centered life and the virtues she practiced while on earth make her the model all Christians should imitate so as to share personally in the redemption effected by her son. According to De La Salle, such was the role of Mary in the life and the redeeming mission of Jesus, and such is her role in our lives as Christians and religious.

Since Mary is the one through whom the Redeemer comes to us as well as the one through whom we come to share in his redemption, as also the model of the redeemed, (151:2) what follows is for him very logical. He saw the son as inseparable from his mother and the mother as the best and only way to go to her son. Therefore he wrote:

The love that Jesus had for St. John, and that of St. John for Jesus, produced a reciprocal love between the Mother of Jesus and the beloved disciple ...

If we truly love Jesus and are in return loved by Him, we are assured of Mary's dearest and tenderest affection. As there is a close relationship between Jesus and His most holy Mother, those who really love Jesus and are loved by Him greatly honor Mary and are fondly cherished by this holy Mother of God... (88:3)

By these words the Saint called on his disciples both to honor the Mother of God and to give a concrete expression to the love which inspired them to honor Our Lady by showing a great devotion to her. In different places, the Founder gave the Brothers a number of different reasons for honoring Mary, the first of which is the honor God himself gave her.

We are under a particular obligation to have a great devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin by reason of the fact that Almighty God Himself honors her in a special manner, having raised her above all pur^o creatures because she bore in her womb Him who is equal to Himself, ... Thus Our Lady is above all other created beings, both by the abundance of graces she has received, ... and by the purity of her life... (151:2)

In addition, he reminded them that the Church teaches us ... "how useful and advantageous" it is to honor Mary "in all our needs," (164:1) and how it is a source of great benefits for those who do so. (151:2)

Then, more specifically and quoting St. Bernard, he presented Mary to his disciples as "the channel by which we ... receive the graces that God may choose to confer on us..." And basing himself on St. Anselm, he insisted "... when we invoke the... Mother of God, the merits of this holy Mother suffice ... to obtain our petitions, even though we do not deserve to be heard." (151:2; 164:2) And he stated what he saw as the practical implications of this situation when he wrote, "We are in this world only that we may work out our salvation. All the means necessary to this end we shall find in Mary, ..." (164:3) This is because, again quoting St. Bernard, De La Salle describes Mary as the "'Star of the Sea,' which enlightens, which guides, and which conducts us safely ... across the stormy sea of the world. ..." (164:1) And, he added, Our Lady "who knows what our destination is, and the best way to follow" to reach it, can make certain we arrive "without mishap" at our Heavenly home. (164:3) And it is very possible for the Mother of God to help us in this way because she has "a perfect understanding of the ways of God," (164:2) as well as a knowledge of "... all the roads (to Heaven), and all the means of preserving us from the dangers which beset them..." (164:2) Then, in some way summarizing all he had said in his two essentially exhortatory meditations as well as in other places, he emphatically admonished his disciples: "In your perils, in difficult and tortuous ways, cast your thoughts on Mary. Invoke her holy name, and forthwith you will find relief and deliverance from your perplexities..." (164:2) For this cannot fail to produce good results:

... When we follow Mary, says St. Bernard, we cannot go astray. When we think of Mary we cannot leave the right path. As long as we pray to her we need never despair of reaching our goal. As long as she upholds and sustains us we cannot fall. As long as she protects us we need have no fear, and as long as she leads we shall never tire. (164:2)

However, the Founder did not want his Brothers to stop by simply recognizing the privileged position of Mary which makes it possible for her to assist us so greatly to attain salvation. In order to obtain her assistance in great abundance, he insisted that the esteem they had for Mary should manifest itself in a real and true devotion to her. Perhaps he did this best, though not exclusively, in his meditation for 5 August, The Feast of Our Lady of the Snow, to which he gave the title, "On Devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin." This meditation, the only one having an "Introduction" of sorts, begins by mentioning the origins of the feast, which was "the remarkable devotion of a Roman gentleman and his wife to the Most Blessed Virgin." (151) Then, after having said how the couple showed their devotion to Mary – by building a church in her honor – he told the Brothers he was aware that they could not do something like this. However, this is not necessary, he adds, nor does Mary desire it. Rather, "All ... (Mary) requires of us is that we should have a special devotion towards her, and that we should foster a like devotion in those whom God has confided to our care ..." (151:1)

Next, practical as always, De La Salle indicated how the Brothers could manifest their devotion to Mary. To begin with he said:

It will avail us but little to be persuaded of the obligation we are under of having a special devotion to Our Lady, unless we know what this devotion consists in, unless we really have it effectively, and unless we make it appear when the occasion offers... (151:3)

Then he continued by asserting:

As Mary is above all other creatures, our devotion towards her must be greater than that which we show towards the other saints, whoever they may be. 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)

For the Founder, then, devotion to Mary was to be the greatest devotion practiced by his disciples, and they were to practice it continually. And showing his consistency in this matter, the Rule of 1717 which he left for the Brothers prescribed five major practices of devotion to Mary as well as other minor ones. And he assured his disciples that if they were faithful to these practices they would "... receive a great abundance of grace through the merits of the Most Blessed Virgin." (151:3)

Still the Saint did not stop here. The Institute he founded was devoted to the apostolate of conducting schools for poor boys. The Brothers were also to show their appreciation of the dignity of Mary and of her role in our salvation by encouraging and leading their students to share in and to practice devotion to the Mother of God. They were exhorted to do so in these words:

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 your fervent prayers, of your own love for Our Lady, and of the zeal you show in your teaching to make her loved by others. (146:2)

Brief as this passage is, it expresses a number of important Marian ideas of the Saint. Once again, he made son and mother inseparable, and devotion to Mary was made to follow naturally from that to her son. At the same time, love for Mary would naturally lead the Brother to seek to share his devotion with others, and the greater his love for Our Lady, the more successful would he be in developing this devotion among his students.

One characteristic which made De La Salle a great educator and which contributed significantly to the success of his work in the schools was the realism with which he approached this task. And he showed this realism both toward the men who shared this apostolate with him as well as toward the students he and they sought to influence and to educate. Aware that his schools served poor boys with a limited background and education, he tailored the school activities in keeping with the character of the students as well as the skills of their teachers. In keeping with Catholic tradition and practice, he saw the rosary as a simple yet efficacious devotion, one very practical for the students in his schools. So in his meditation for the Feast of St. Dominic he wrote:

... One of the chief means which they (the Dominicans) employ to induce the faithful to lead a pious life, is to impress them with a great devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin, particularly by means of the rosary ...

Then he asked:

Do you say the rosary every day, and are you faithful to make your pupils recite it? With what piety do you and your pupils perform this action? ... (150:3)

However, the Founder seemed to consider honoring Our Lady by the daily and prayerful recitation of the Rosary only a good starting point. And he encourages his disciples to use all possible means to develop a great and tender devotion to Mary among their students. With this in view he wrote:

... One of the most efficacious methods by which to accomplish the good expected of you in your employment, is to have a marked devotion to Our Lady, and to enkindle the same in the hearts of those who have been confided to your care. ... (150:3)

For the Saint, spreading devotion to Mary was a natural result of the Brother's own devotion to the Mother of God. But in addition to that, it was also a means of ensuring the Brother's salvation as well as of earning him a high place in Heaven: "*Let us rest assured that all we do to honor the Most Blessed Virgin and to make her honored, will be very abundantly rewarded by God through her ...*" (151:1)

Now it seems possible to note the following as we conclude this presentation of De La Salle's Marian doctrine as it is presented in his two main sets of meditations. In these writings the Founder did provide his disciples with a rather complete doctrinal basis for their devotion to the Mother of God. Among other things, these writings stressed Mary's multi-faceted role in God's plan of redemption, how she is both a channel of his graces to men as well as the means by which we on earth can go to God, and the ways in which she is a model for those who wish to share personally in this redemption. Likewise, by showing how Our Lady was chosen and honored by God, these writings encouraged his disciples to honor her. And to help them to do so, they indicated both some suitable practices of devotion as well as the advantages these can procure for those who make use of them.

In addition, since the Brothers were engaged in an apostolate of teaching youth, the Saint sought to encourage them to share their devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin with their pupils and suggested how they could do so. By expressing these ideas in the way he did, the holy priest clearly indicated to his disciples how and why he considered Mary as our surest guide on the perilous road to Heaven, the one who can best lead us safely there. (164:2,3) And by thus showing the place Our Lady has in God's plan of salvation, he tried also to encourage them to have an intense and continual devotion to her as a means of securing the help she is only too willing to give us. (151:3) It was in ways such as these that De La Salle tried to share with his disciples, and through them with the students, his own great and filial devotion to the Mother of God. In addition, for his disciples today who still read these meditations, he shows how "*the total 'Yes' that Mary spoke to God*" can help them to "*discover the meaning of their own consecration,*" and he also indicates how like her they can be "*docile towards the Spirit who brings them to the likeness of Christ ...*" (Rule, 76) ●

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