

«THE DUTIES OF A CHRISTIAN»
(Les Devoirs d'un Chrétien)
and the
CATECHISM
OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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1992-1993 has seen the appearance in the major European languages of the **Catechism of the Catholic Church**; it should therefore be of interest to recall that St. John Baptist de La Salle wrote a similar work in the early eighteenth century: **Les devoirs d'un chrétien**, 1st edition Paris 1703.

It has always seemed strange to me that this work is so little known even among the Brothers. To my knowledge there has as yet been no authorised published translation in English. (1)

This seems all the stranger in that, from 1703 until 1928, there more than 250 editions, re-impressions or adaptations of the original French.

(For that information and for what follows I am indebted completely to the *Introduction of Cahier lasallien, n° 20, edited by Brother Maurice-Auguste, 1964.*)

It seems that St. De La Salle conceived of this work as three concentric circles: there is a text en discours suivi, a continuous exposition of Catholic doctrine of faith, morals and worship in two volumes – quite a substantial work. Then there is a *Grand Abrégé* and finally a *Petit Abrégé*: these being, as the titles suggest, summarized or abridged forms of the fuller presentation.

It would seem that the full text (en discours suivi) was intended for the Brothers' own use and instruction; it is written at the level of adult readers and is quite substantial in content and presentation. (2)

The two *Abrégés* seem to be destined respectively for older and younger pupils. It is these which, couched as they are in question and answer form, resemble what we have traditionally known as catechisms.

When there is mention of **Les Devoirs** having been continuously in print for more than 200 years, it is the text "en discours suivi" we refer to; there is no indication that the two smaller works survived very long after their original publication. (Probably this was because

there was an abundance of diocesan catechisms which met the needs of school children; whereas there would not have been many general presentations of Catholic doctrine pitched at the level which St. de La Salle aimed at, having in view, no doubt, the specific needs of his Brothers).

Plan of The Duties:

In construction **Les Devoirs** follow the schema of an exposition of:

1. the Creed, the Apostles' Creed;
2. Christian morality following the sequence of the Ten Commandments (and the Seven Deadly Sins);
3. the Sacraments;
4. Prayer.

St. De La Salle explains this order – instinctively and unself-consciously it would seem to me – when, in his **Preface**, he writes:

"We owe God four things, which we discharge through our Christian Religion: we must know him, adore him, love him and obey him. We know God by Faith; we adore him by Prayer and by Sacrifice; we obey him by observing his holy Commandments, and those of his Church, and by avoiding sin which he forbids; we can love him only if we possess Grace, which makes us pleasing to him; and this Grace is given us only through Prayer and the Sacraments. These four things comprise all that is practised and all that is taught in the Christian and Catholic Religion..."

Thus:

knowledge:	Faith	Creed
adoration:	Prayer,	Sacrifice (=the Mass)
obedience:		Commandments
love:	Grace	through Prayer & Sacraments

It is of interest to compare this order with that of the C.C.C. For its own very good reasons, the new C.C.C. follows the sequence of Creed, Sacraments, Commandments and Prayer. (3)

This is the same order as that of the famous **Catechism of the Council of Trent** which set the pattern for four centuries. It explains itself thus: "The **Creed** contains all that is to be held according to Christian faith. The **Sacraments** are the signs and instruments of grace. The **Decalogue** contains whatever has reference to the Law, "whose end is charity". The **Lord's Prayer** shows us whatever can be the object of the Church's desires or hopes or prayers." (*Introduction*).

The Title of De La Salle's Catechism:
«The Duties of a Christian»

To me it is of some significance that St. De La Salle should have chosen to call his catechetical work "The **Duties** of a Christian"; this seems to reflect what I consider to be a characteristic turn of mind of his. (4)

St. De La Salle was himself strongly a **moralist**, and he lived in a highly moralistic age; hence it is not so strange that he should present his catechetical work as an exposition of man's **twofold duty**, namely **to know and love God**. Thus, on p. 1, we read as a sub-title of the First Part and the First Treatise: "Concerning the first Duty of a Christian, which is to know God"; this occupies 88 pages. The Second Treatise opens with the title: "Concerning the second Duty of a Christian, which is to love God"; this takes up 103 pages. We then pass on to a consideration of the sacraments and prayer which are treated as "the Means of acquitting ourselves well of our duties towards God", 300 pages.

Thus, as distinct from the traditional structure noted above, of Creed, Commandments, Sacraments and Prayer, St. De La Salle seems to work on a more basic underlying and unifying concept viz. that of **duty**, a twofold duty, to know and love God, doubtless echoing Christ's own declaration: "This is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent; ... that the world may recognize that it was you who sent me and that you have loved them as you have loved me." (John 17, 3 & 23b.)

Moralistic Emphasis:

A moralistic emphasis – i.e. an emphasis on duty, on moral obligation – rings out from the very first lines of the **Preface of Les Devoirs**: "To belong to a Profession and not to know what it is, even to be ignorant of what one's very name signifies, what it obliges one to, and what are the **duties** it involves, would appear to be completely contrary to common sense and right reason; and yet this is something quite usual among the greater number of Christians: they are Christian without knowing what it means to be such, and few of them give themselves any trouble to learn what they should do to live this Profession well." (Emphasis added).

Such a moralistic perspective might seem to some at least it would seem so to me – to be undue, were it not that it is well balanced by the profound insistence with which, throughout his writings generally, as well as in this work, St. De La Salle returns to a consideration of the *Principal Mysteries of Religion* and their place in personal Christian life, and especially in the spirituality of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. (5)

Both are essential components of St. De La Salle's personal and professional outlook on our Catholic religion: **faith and morals**: the mysteries of revelation to be contemplated and appropriated into one's own spirituality (by "the spirit of faith"); and the moral implications of our beliefs to be accepted and lived out in their fullness.

Even so, the impression of St. de La Salle has left in the mind of the reader by the final paragraph of **Les Devoirs**, which closes a work of nearly 500 (in-12°) pages, would probably remain that of **the moralist**: "The principal effect which these Prayers should produce in us is to make us **practise the maxims of the Holy Gospel**; it is also the great advantage which we can draw from the knowledge of the Holy Mysteries and of the Doctrine of the Church." (p. 494, emphasis added.)

Conclusion:

It is not my intention to go further into the content and presentation of **Les Devoirs**; the text is available in *Cahier 20, 21, 22*. I would simply like to say that throughout 1992, when I was teaching our novices in P N G, I often went to the **Devoirs** to find a statement to enrich or illustrate what I was presenting from other catechetical texts, I always found what St. De La Salle had written particularly informative and spiritually reinforcing. It seems to me a great pity that the Brothers generally seem to be so little aware of what I think is a central part of our literary – spiritual and pedagogical – heritage.

In conclusion let me quote from the final words of the **Preface**: "In fact, all that a Christian has to do in this world is **to know God and love Him**; all his obligations are reduced to these two: we know God by Faith and it is by Charity that we love Him."

(1) The only English presentation I have seen is an abridged and adapted version got out by the Irish Christian Brothers in the mid-nineteenth century; I saw a copy of this some years ago in the library of the Benedictine monastery in Arcadia, N.S.W., Australia.

(2) It has been suggested to me by Brother Finian Allman that the volumes known to our generation of Brothers as **Dogma Moral and Worship** were possibly modelled on **Les Devoirs**.

(3) Cardinal Ratzinger explains: "The **Catechism** must be read as a unity. Its pages on morality would be read in a false way if they were to be separated from the whole context, that is, from the profession of faith, from the doctrine on the sacraments and prayer..." At the Press Conference introducing the **Catechism of the Catholic Church**, 8 December 1992.

(4) I dealt with this in LASALLIANA N° 20.

(5) Similarly, in LASALLIANA N° 4.