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LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY

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It would seem that we are in an age when the major religious families of the Church feel the need to restate the nature of their spirituality and of their charism. Since vocations to the religious life no longer tend to be assessed, even in the Church, on the basis of their apostolic work, religious congregations turn to their evangelical origins to rediscover the essence of their being, and their radical way of living the Gospel and following in the footsteps of Christ.

Our own Institute has been no exception to this contemporary trend. The presence of a great number of competent lay people in our establishments has forced us to restate the specific identity of the Brother. The increasing involvement of the State in education has made it imperative to redefine the importance and originality of the "apostolic ministry of education". When people become isolated and are pushed this way and that, they find it necessary to seek unity and a sense of continuity.

It is not possible to treat all these points in any depth in a single article. We shall restrict ourselves, therefore, to giving a summary of Lasallian spirituality, and to highlighting in particular the admirable unity that exists in it between being and acting.

1. A word regarding vocabulary

Let us start by defining what is meant by "spirituality" and by "charism", since these two words are often used interchangeably and with a certain amount of looseness. We have taken our definitions from the Dictionary of Spirituality.

"A *spirituality* is a basic, practical and existential attitude which results from and expresses a person's understanding of his religious life.

"It is the active and permanent decision governing a person's life based on objective insights and fundamental decisions"

In spite of the somewhat abstract terminology, we see that spirituality encompasses the whole of a person's life, his views, his aims, his experience and his decisions. It is the mainspring of his freedom and of his actions in all their most fundamental decisions.

One could say therefore that, because of its all-encompassing nature, a spirituality can define, direct and give growth to a form of religious life and to a religious family.

"A *charism* is a free and supernatural gift given for the good of the community and of the Mystical Body.

"This gift is not given to a person because of his merits, but because he is worthy of God's favours. It is not a gift that is of itself sanctifying, but it becomes so in contact with the person concerned. It is a gift that gives a grace of state.

"Its purpose is to enable a person to proclaim the Gospel and to do so effectively".

A charism is clearly to do with the apostolate and is not sufficient, therefore, to define an identity.

2. Lasallian spirituality

1. **Sources:** This article is based mainly on the Meditations for the Time of Retreat.

However, we cannot speak of Lasallian spirituality without reference to Lasallian writings as a whole and without an intimate knowledge of them. Nor can we ignore the living tradition of the Institute, because it helps us to understand the sacred history in which the Brothers have become involved.

2. **Three closely related key expressions** summarise Lasallian spirituality. They were formulated by Brother Jacques Goussin as a result of some group work. These expressions are as follows:

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| * faith which contemplates salvation | | all this within
the context of
a community. |
| * a profession/ministry committed to salvation | | |
| * praise which celebrates salvation | | |

One word is common and central to all three expressions: SALVATION.

Three nouns define Lasallian life: faith, profession or ministry, prayer or praise.

Three verbs describe our apostolic life: contemplating, committing oneself, celebrating.

3. **A diagram** will help us to understand how these different elements are related and interact.

This diagram is circular in order to show that what is involved is a whole, that it shares the same life, and that any one element is related to all the others.

In the centre is salvation:

- salvation willed by God and accomplished in Jesus Christ,
- salvation that has to be brought about, announced,
- because we realise that it is a reality in our own lives and in those of young people.

The centre is connected to three points on the circumference of the large circle. These points are of equal importance. They represent the three elements listed above, three distinct but simultaneous aspects of a Brother's life, interacting with one another constantly:

- faith inducing praise and commitment

- the ministry, nourished by a view of faith, inducing praise in others
- praise which leads us to concentrate on the one and only Good, without making us lose sight of our human roots.



3. Faith which contemplates salvation

One cannot speak of faith in the abstract. It is an experience. It is nourished by experience.

We read of one such experience in Mark's Gospel (5,25-34), where the woman with the haemorrhage is healed. "If I can touch even his clothes...I shall be well again". Why was she so confident? "She had heard about Jesus". What she had heard about Jesus was his goodness, that he went to the poor and the weak, that he saved them through signs, and even more so by his affection and his way of relating. The woman expresses her faith secretly. She does not want to be seen: "she came up behind him through the crowd".

Like her, we too are weak beggars, but faith makes us "stealers of grace", because God cannot resist such confidence.

The Meditations for the Time of Retreat speak of this same experience of salvation. More exactly, they invite the Brother or educator to reassess this experience; to reassess it in order to contemplate it in himself and in his pupils.

1. The experience of salvation

"Consider Jesus as the Good Shepherd of the Gospel seeking the lost sheep, placing it upon his shoulders, and bringing it back to the fold" (M 196,1).

"Admire this goodness of God, providing for all the needs of his creatures, taking the means to procure for them the knowledge of the true good, that is, the salvation of souls" (M 197,1).

2. Giving meaning to the Covenant

We have to provide for all their needs. This involves giving each child the means to become free, and to be able to relate. This means setting up a covenant and providing proofs.

When the Founder writes:

"In his providential care, God has appointed others to take the place of fathers and mothers in this responsibility. He sends persons with the necessary enlightenment and zeal..." (M 193,2), he is not thinking of doing away with the parents, although a first reading of the text might give that impression. What he does want to do is to extend the relationship (the covenant) so that the young person may become free. We are speaking here of spiritual freedom, but also at the same time, of human freedom.

Extending relationships means giving meaning to the covenant:

"God... wants everyone to be saved. He cannot truly desire this without providing the necessary means...he has chosen you to help in this work" (M 193,3).

3. Contemplation of God the Saviour

Our contemplation of the willed and accomplished salvation leads us to contemplate its Author:

"God is so good...that he also desires that all of us come to the knowledge of the truth" (M 193,1). The truth is God himself and what he has chosen to reveal to us, a God of tenderness, love and mercy.

To advance in this truth is "to attain the knowledge of God and his mysteries" (M 193,2), and in particular to know "the mystery of the Holy Trinity" (M 199,1).

This knowledge of God, which must be constantly deepened, nourishes faith and develops in each person "the Christian spirit...which none of the princes of this world have known" (M 194,2).

All this is such a serious matter, but especially such a beautiful and marvellous one, that an account will have to be given as to whether "you have taken care to keep yourself informed" (M 206,1), even before considering what you have done for the children and the young people. We have to take steps to inform ourselves in order to nourish our contemplation and have faith that is beyond the ordinary. As Brother Superior would write, we have to be "men of exceptional faith".

4. A profession/ministry which is committed to salvation

Which term should we use, "profession" or "ministry" ?

"Profession" has a secular connotation which perhaps jars in a spiritual context. But is it not the task of the Brother to transform his profession into an integral part of his spiritual and apostolic life?

Is "ministry" more suitable? This is the term used by the Founder in the Meditations for the Time of Retreat.

From an etymological point of view [in French] the meaning of the two words is identical. They are both derived from the Latin "ministerium". Strictly speaking, profession/ministry is tautologous.

1. The salvation willed by God is far from young people

The Founder notes that the situation - no different from the one we know - has a frightening and inevitable logic about it:

- The inadequacy of parents: "Most parents are not suffi-

ciently enlightened in these matters" (M 193,2). They cannot be blamed because they spend their time "earning the necessities of life" (M 193,2).

– The result is that, in practice, children are abandoned: "the children...live on their own, roaming all over...They are too poor to pay teachers" (M 194,1).

– The combination of consequences are well known: "The results of this condition are regrettable" (M 194,1); they find it difficult to settle down to work; they have bad companions; bad habits are ingrained and many sins committed.

It is this last point that preoccupies the Founder especially. He returns to it often: the destruction of sin is one of the main reasons why the Christian Schools were founded, because we must be careful not to displease God, and to extend his covenant. (M 202,1).

"I am so zealous for the glory of my God that I cannot see you forsake the covenant" (M 202,1).

2. God finds this situation intolerable

Following God's example, the heart of the Brother must go out to these abandoned children. The Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep cannot abandon it.

"God has had the goodness to remedy this unfortunate situation by establishing the Christian Schools".

3. Bringing about the salvation of God

We are always tempted to make a distinction between the human and the Christian plane. In practice, we do this in schools when we separate religious education from secular studies. The distinction has to be made, but it is based on a false premiss, because both aspects of education are concerned with the same person.

In the Meditations for the Time of Retreat, the Founder seems to insist on religious education. However, he has already taught us not to make these distinctions in our profession, for, in it, it is the whole person that is concerned (both the young person's and the teacher's).

"They are a letter which Christ dictates to you, which you write each day in their hearts, not with ink, but by the Spirit of the living God" (M 195,2).

These Meditations speak at length about the means and attitudes which will bring others to a knowledge of God's wisdom: the Brother is the minister of reconciliation (M 193,3; M 198,3):

– He has "to lay the foundation of religion and Christian virtue in the hearts of these children" (M 193,2).

– He has "to teach them the practical truths of faith" (M 194,3).

– He has to help them develop "conduct that is proper to a Christian child" (M 200,3).

4. It is you that God has chosen

God's goodness and will to save are such that he himself calls and inspires people to accomplish his work. "It is I who have chosen and called you...".

"He also kindles a light in the heart of those whom he has called to announce his word to children" (M 193,1). "You must not doubt that it is a great gift of God..." (M 201,1).

5. This interior enlightenment, this gift, involves a person so closely in God's plan that it invites him to adopt the behaviour of God as his own.

"Ask God today for the grace of watching so well over the children confided to you, that you will take every possible care to shield them from serious faults" (M 197,3).

To adopt the behaviour of God means to: "cheer the faint-hearted, support the weak, and be patient towards all" (M 198,2). It means also "to admonish the unruly" (M 198,2). To admonish and correct is a sign of zeal: "Reproof and correction cause them to reflect..." (M 203,1).

God uses correction to encourage conversion. The Christian teacher does the same. His task is to change habits "to bring those under your guidance into that liberty of the children of God..." (M 203,2). He does this by behaving like God and using gentleness and patience (M 203,2).

6. You are a sacrament (sign) of Jesus Christ

Just as Jesus Christ was the sacrament of the Father, the Brother is invited to become like Jesus Christ to such an extent that he must become a living sign of God's salvation here and now.

"You must study in the Gospel how Jesus brought his disciples to practise the truths of the Gospel" (M 196,2).

"Since you are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ in the work that you do, you must act as representing Jesus Christ himself. He wants your disciples to see him in you..." (M 195,2).

7. The apostolic ministry of education

To understand what the Founder meant by his frequent use of the word "ministry", we can use two of the many possible approaches:

– We can study the specific vocation of the Brother in the context of the apostolic work of the Church;

– or we can look at a major threat to the Brother's vocation, that is, the danger of his becoming purely and simply a professional.

In order that a school can function properly, priority will often be given to secular matters (is there anything that is really secular?). The Founder invites the Brother to transform his profession (there is no question of devaluing it) into an apostolic ministry of education (which has to be constantly upgraded).

"In calling you to this holy ministry, God demands that you fulfil it with an ardent zeal for their salvation. For this is the work of God..." (M 201,1).

"It is for the Church (which is the body of Christ) that you work. You have become her ministers" (M 201,2).

This is the context in which all fundamental thinking about catechesis should be conducted.

5. Praise which celebrates salvation

We cannot consider bringing God's salvation to young people with perseverance and fidelity, let alone succeed in doing so, without feeling within ourselves and in community, the effect that this salvation has had on us, and the way it has transformed us and continues to do so. This is done by

bringing peace, joy, assurance, whatever the difficulties encountered.

As true witnesses to the predisposing love of the Father, to the action of the Holy Spirit and to the companionship of Christ, we give thanks constantly for "God's conduct in our regard", for he has led us further than we could have ever imagined possible. The first ones to be caught up by salvation are ourselves.

1. The very centre of our lives is a place of praise

"Frequently give yourself to the Spirit of Our Lord to act only under his influence" (M 195,2). The Founder goes on to add: "and not through any self-seeking". In other words, your contribution will be so inspired by the Spirit of Christ that you will truly be an image of Jesus Christ.

"This will be the glory of My Father, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples" (M 195,2).

2. Where young people are is a place of praise

This is so because the Brother wishes salvation to make progress in the lives of young people. And even, as frequently happens, he sees no sign of this, his faith tells him that grace is working to help these young people to choose freely.

Prayer is not an illusion. "It is your duty to go up to God every day by mental prayer to learn from him all that you must teach your children, and then come down to them by accommodating yourself to their level in order to teach them what God has communicated to you for them...in your mental prayer" (198,1).

"You have spiritual exercises which are arranged for your own sanctification, but if you have an ardent zeal for the salvation of those whom you are called to teach, you will not fail to perform them and to relate them to this purpose...In doing this you will draw on your students the graces needed to contribute to their salvation and...God will take responsibility for yours" (M 205,2).

3. Mental prayer, a time for praise to be given priority

Mental prayer is not locking oneself up with God: it is intimacy which gives impetus. It is not egocentricity, but an inward movement to meet an Other, the living God, who himself sends us back to others through whom he gives

himself.

"You must therefore devote yourself very thoroughly to prayer in order to succeed in your ministry. You must constantly represent the needs of your disciples to Jesus Christ..." (M 196,1).

4. Christ's Eucharist and ours

The offering is the most important point of the Mass. Left to ourselves, we have little to offer, and so we offer the very One who offered himself for us. The sanctity of Christ will become ours at communion: "Take and eat", says the Lord.

"Admire this holy institution (the Eucharist) and endeavour to render yourself worthy of participating therein by living a holy life. Beseech Our Lord when receiving him this day, to destroy your evil inclinations and your self-will, that you may henceforth have no other inclinations than his, and that you may conduct yourself solely by his spirit" (M 26,2).

The Eucharist is a sign and the fulfilment of salvation.

6. Sharing the experience of God

1. Article 48 of the Rule invites us to share our "experience of God" in community.

Such sharing is difficult, hesitant, tentative, probably because of our own reservations. Another reason is doubtlessly that we have to cope with other people's circumstances, age and experiences which are always special. Even when living in the same community we have our own lives.

The present article, with its summary of Lasallian spirituality, can perhaps help this sharing: unity of hearts can be built on a diversity of experience, because we are all guided by the same source of inspiration.

2. It is essential for the future of the Institute in the Church to acquire a deeper understanding of our originality and our identity within the great spiritual movements.

In the future, many services and ministries will be in the hands of non-religious lay people. The great movement which began with Vatican II is bound to grow stronger.

More than ever in the past, when our social function was enough to give us our identity, it will be important to be able say what the road is that the Spirit has inspired us to follow.