

## THE SPIRITUAL DOCTRINE of St John Baptist de La Salle

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### Sources and originality

De La Salle did not hesitate to borrow material from sources that existed in the closing years of the 17th century. He borrowed from Olier, the Carmelite Laurent de la Résurrection, St Francis de Sales, Bernières, St Teresa of Avila, Rancé, the Jesuit Busée, Beuvelet the disciple of Bourdoise, Tronson, the Minim Barré, the Capuchin Jean François de Reims, Canon Roland, Claude Bretagne of the Community of St Maur and the archdeacon Boudon. His teachings, however, are based on his experience, and if such or such author attracts him, it is only to the extent that his work reflects his own experience. Let us try to see what are the main points of his teachings.

#### A. "Called by God to do God's work"

De La Salle sought to make his Brothers realise that their educational work was God's work.

1. **Mission and vocation:** *"Often call to mind the object of your vocation, and let this thought urge you to establish and maintain this reign of God in the hearts of those whom you instruct"* (M 67,1). *"To work for the salvation of souls is to be a collaborator of Jesus Christ and to work in the service of the Church. This is why we must ask the Holy Spirit himself to act, for he alone can make us live spiritually. The purpose of the mission is to build the Heavenly City. The Brother's task is to prepare the heirs of Jesus Christ"*.

2. **Faith and zeal:** Living faith is the beginning and end of the Brother's ministry. The object of this ministry is the education of young people in the faith. The basis of the whole of Christian life is *to know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent*.

De La Salle was always very careful about being orthodox in his teachings:

– *"Attach yourself to all that is of faith, flee from novelty, follow the tradition of the Church, approve what it approves, in all things give it a perfect and prompt obedience"*.

– *"Faith is not restricted to new knowledge: it means attachment to the person of Christ"*.  
– *"Faith is the foundation necessary for charity; it was the most important gift of Pentecost"*.

The active contemplation of the mystery of Salvation calls for zeal for the Kingdom. The contemplation of God leads to a sharing in his love for mankind. In the same way, faith shows us Jesus Christ in the person of the poor.

#### B. "Live according to the interior man by the movement of the Spirit"

The life of the Brother must be a constant search for the Living God, his will and his Kingdom. This fidelity requires an effort to be interior, to cooperate with the interior movements of the Spirit, and to live in the presence of God.

##### 1. "Regulate one's interior life so as to live only by the conduct of God"

– De La Salle insists on the need to be separated from the world. It is a question of protecting ourselves from becoming contaminated by the spirit of the world, which is hostile towards God and opposed to the spirit of Christianity. De La Salle's teaching on self-control and the mortification of the mind and the senses is unremitting and uncompromising. He frequently quotes and comments on scripture passages referring to renunciation, penance, carrying one's cross, losing one's life, mortifying one's body, divesting oneself of the old man and putting on the new. *"Just as we must live by the Spirit, so must we also be led only by the Spirit. One cannot be sensual and Christian at the same time"*.  
– *"Poverty is the foundation of evangelical perfection"*. Through renunciation a person tears out the root of all evil.

– To build up the interior man, mortification of the mind is more important than that of the senses: *"you must give up the satisfactions of the mind"*, because they "nourish self-will", stop the Spirit of God from entering, and prevent this Spirit of God from acting in the

soul and spreading his unction.

– Rigorous asceticism is normally presented as being the proof of genuine mysticism: union with God, conformity to Christ, life according to the Spirit, the total gift of oneself to the service of souls, require a person to die to himself.

## 2. Responding to the movements of the Holy Spirit.

For De La Salle, the *interior person* is a spiritual person. The practice of asceticism and recollection so as to live in the depths of one's soul, is laid down as a means to facilitate attention and docility to the movements of the Spirit. One of the points De La Salle makes when speaking of devotion to the Virgin Mary is her docility to the Spirit. *Mary will help the Brother to have a fidelity like hers, and this is an essential aspect of devotion to her.*

## C. "Live in the presence of God, for God, abandon yourself totally to the conduct of God".

1. Life in the presence of God: The frequent recall of the presence of God is one of the ten commandments proper to the Brothers, and a means of acquiring the spirit of the Institute.

2. Live for God, give oneself totally to him and to his Kingdom: *Without any merit on the part of the Brother, God has chosen and destined him to collaborate in his work.*

3. Fidelity to the will of God to the extent of total abandonment: the Brother must recognise and adore in all things the orders and the will of God. In a letter to Gabriel Drolin (Letter 18) regarding the opening of a school, De La Salle says the following: *"I do not like to make the first move in any endeavour, and I will not do it in Rome any more than elsewhere. I leave it to Divine Providence to make the first move and then I am satisfied"*.

In the final analysis, abandonment to the will of God is motivated "by love and imitation of Our Lord".

## D. Announce the Gospel to poor children:

Brothers live together in community as Ministers of the Word of God in order to exercise their ministry better. The ministry of the Word is entrusted to them by God and by the Church. Their mission is to be Ambassadors and Witnesses to Jesus Christ.

1. *"It is the poor you have to teach. The purpose of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children"*.

2. *"The mystery of the community is the mystery of the Church itself.* The sanctifying power of community comes from the active presence of the Spirit, but also from the fact that *it withdraws from the world those who become part of it.* We have to be united in God and have only one spirit. As St John says: *"He who has charity lives in God and God lives in him"*.

## Conclusion

The teachings of De La Salle reflect the various currents and trends of the golden age of French spirituality. Lasallian spirituality, like the life of the Founder as a whole, cannot be dissociated from the post-Tridentine Catholic reformation movement. In his teachings we can recognise the basic ideas of Francis de Sales, Bérulle and the Company of Jesus: his attraction to simple attention in mental prayer; the central position occupied by the Incarnate Word and his mysteries; the following of Christ through docility to the action of the Spirit of Jesus; the stress on self-abnegation and detachment; conformity to the will of God, etc.

Even if some aspects or emphases of his teachings are less current nowadays, their solid Christianity and the way they always centre on the mystery of salvation, can help us in our spiritual life. There is much that young people in the Church today can learn from the study of the spirit, the charism, the teachings and the spiritual life of John Baptist de La Salle.