

LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY: LIVING SALVATION HISTORY TODAY

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I understand by the term "*spirituality*" the way a Christian lives his relationship with God, enters into dialogue with Him, responds to His calls and puts himself in the disposition to welcome, in faith, the impulses and the orientations of the Holy Spirit.

For the same reason it is the key to reading about the experience of interior and religious life and about a person's apostolic work.

To my way of thinking, at the very root of the spirituality of St. John Baptist de La Salle and of Lasallian spirituality is the prolific encounter between the biblical contemplation of the History of Salvation and the present call of each moment: to become actively involved by means of an educational service to new generations.

In other words, this deals with one's own life coming face to face with the Word of God, in a concrete way, so that one's own existential and social experience might frequently encounter the proposed plan, guided by the light of God's Word.

1. THE ROOT

1. The original idea, one proper to St. John Baptist de La Salle, is well summarized in Article 11 of the Rule: "Deeply moved by the way in which the children of the artisans and the poor were abandoned, John Baptist de La Salle discerned, in faith, the mission of his Institute as a **practical response to his prayerful consideration of this fact in relation to God's plan of salvation**".

His spirituality has its root here; it is composed of both Biblical inspiration and historical, social sensibility, closely linked to inspire a continuing apostolic project.

2. The "**eyes of faith**" with which De La Salle faces reality enable him to grasp this profound situation in three ways:

a. *God's plan of salvation*, discerned in frequent contact with the Word of God, is always in process: "God is so good that, having created us, he wills that all of us come to the knowledge of the truth" (Meditation 193.1). This plan of salvation reaches its fullness in Jesus, reaching out to all mankind.

For De La Salle this is the milestone, the essential premise for his options and his program, the support and nourishment for whatever project, at each step along the spiritual journey of his life.

b. *The new generations* that are creating their own history, for various social and structural reasons that La Salle analyzes with realism and openness (cf. Meditation 193.2; 194.1, etc.), are on the wrong road or they encounter great obstacles in participating in God's Plan of Salvation. They need "guides" and "visible angels" (Meditation 198) to discover the

good they should do and the way to do it in order to become coheirs with Christ (cf. Meditation 198.1).

c. The Lasallian is called to enter personally into this dynamic and to take on the "work of God" as his own in an educational project that today produces and functions as "sacred history".

For De La Salle, by serving and promoting human and spiritual growth one becomes a collaborator with God, a trustee of a ministry in favor of the building up of the Kingdom, an ambassador and minister of Jesus Christ, the one who completes the project of salvation.

"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 and receive your instructions as if he were giving them to them" (Meditation 195.2).

3. The close connection of these three ways is the generating principle of the many consequences of Lasallian spirituality, first, in the life of the Founder and then in the secular experience of his disciples.

2. CONSEQUENCES

The main ones can be spelled out in the following way:

1. The **profound unity** between the relationship with God, the spiritual life and the educator's personal salvation, on the one hand, and the educational duty for the guiding of mankind towards salvation, on the other. De La Salle expresses this with the idea of "making no distinction" between the work that one does for education and one's own consecration to God; between educational "office" and ecclesial "ministry" of salvation.

"Try, please, to perform all your actions with the thought of God's presence in mind and through sentiments of faith, for that is the spirit of your state" (Letter 87.5).

2. This "**faith**" – fidelity to God who calls and sends – and the resulting "**zeal**" – fidelity to mankind and to the mission carried out with love – finds a proper balance in the consciousness of fulfilling God's work, no matter what work is undertaken for humanity.

"In the same way God will furnish you with all that you need if your only thought is to sanctify yourself and to fulfill well the duties of your state...God, who created all people, desires them to receive what they need, and when other means fail provides for them himself. In your state you are doing God's work; rest assured that he will take care of you provided that you serve him faithfully and omit nothing that he asks of you". (Meditation 59.3).

3. Participation in the salvific plan of God implies a **community dimension**, that is to say, an acting "together and by association" with all who are committed to the same educa-

tional project, a concrete expression of the building up of the Kingdom of God: helping people grow and bringing them to the knowledge of being loved and saved by the Father, in Christ Jesus.

4. Daily contact with the **Word of God** helps one to consider all things in the light of revelation, deepened by prayer and familiarity with Sacred Scripture which produces the inner disposition of total abandonment to God and availability for his service.

This attitude leads one to view reality with a "new look". As a result, each action becomes a gesture of faith and is constantly purified by the motivations behind the action.

This is a fundamental aspect of the spirituality of those who live each day immersed in educational or organizational activities which by themselves seem to have little to do with anything "spiritual" or "religious".

De La Salle's letter to Brother Anastase is, from this point of view, an exceptional treatise about the basic elements of Lasallian spirituality. It is worth transcribing in its entirety:

"Apply yourself, above all, my very dear Brother, to be motivated by faith so that your actions may be well done.

I am very glad that your whole aim and intention is to do God's will.

In order to succeed in this, you should strive particularly to be submissive and to observe your rules well, for it is in this that you will carry out God's will.

Take great care about prayer and try to do all your actions in a prayerful spirit. The more faithful you are in these matters, the more God will bless you.

Often recollect yourself in order to renew and strengthen in your mind the remembrance of the presence of God. The more you try to achieve this, the easier you will find it to perform your actions and carry out your duties well.

I am very pleased with the frame of mind that you say you have, to do all I want of you.

I ask God to give you in abundance the spirit of your state" (Letter 72).

5. Life, then, is lived in the **presence of God**. This dimension, on which De La Salle insists so much, even to the point of its becoming an ascetic "exercise" frequently carried out throughout each day, means acting according to the Holy Spirit, or better yet, "by the movement of the Spirit". One thereby enters deeply into the maxims of the Gospel to the point of identifying with Jesus, the model of life and of apostolic work.

"Apply yourself often to remember the presence of God. Look upon this practice as your greatest happiness" (Letter 87.1).

6. A result of this spirituality is the **transformation of the academic and educational reality** into an encounter with God, as much for educators as for students; into a salvific atmosphere, where human life can discover its new dimension in a relationship with God's plan.

For the same reason, all that favors the "good functioning" of the schools becomes a vocational commitment: sufficient teacher preparation, professional updating, the use of didactic methods, attention given to each person, etc.

All of these aspects, too, fit into Lasallian spirituality in their own right, since De La Salle considers them to be not only beautiful, well-organized human structures, but also

ways to build up God's work.

His conviction of the importance of apostolic action in the school is such that he writes a sentence to Brother Robert that a superficial reading might find strange: "It is better to omit some part of the spiritual exercises than to take time from class to carry out what is necessary, for you must not lose a minute from class" (Letter 41.5).

3. A FULLY MODERN SPIRITUALITY

If we examine De La Salle's life carefully, we realize that his spirituality *is not theoretical*. It is the experience of his personal life and his life with the first Brothers. It is the practical translation of the perception of the presence of the God who saves, who extends the history of salvation to today. One's own active immersion in this divine story merits the gift of a life.

1. The affirmation of the 39th General Chapter (1967) has definitely not been lost nowadays: "The Brothers are convinced that in the life, work, and writings of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, the Holy Spirit is revealed in a privileged manner, and that they will find there even today a living principle for their guidance" (Declaration 5.1).

Such a conviction has been expanded to include many other educators and Lasallians who are deepening and enhancing Lasallian spirituality as an orientation for their own lives.

The Rule clearly recognizes this phenomenon: "The *spiritual gifts* which the Church has received in St. John Baptist de La Salle go far beyond the confines of the Institute which he founded. The Institute sees the existence of the various Lasallian movements as a grace from God renewing its own vitality. The Institute can associate with itself lay people who want to lead the life of perfection that the Gospel demands, by living according to the spirit of the Institute and by participating in its mission" (Rule 146).

2. From this perspective, Lasallian spirituality is not only known and deepened, but it is considered to be a source of inspiration, a point of departure of a continual, faithful and original creation. "The life of an Institute is a continual challenge to be creative while remaining faithful to its origins. It can sometimes call for difficult commitments, as John Baptist de La Salle discovered at various points in his life. Today, as in the past, he challenges the Brothers, not only as the one who established the Institute but as the Founder who continues to inspire it and sustain it. Filled with the spirit which he left them as their legacy, the Brothers grow in the living tradition of the Institute. In communion with those who have gone before them they continue to respond with ardent zeal to the appeals of the Lord, the Church and the world, in order to procure the glory of God" (Rule 149).

3. This is possible only if Lasallians can profoundly reclaim the important conviction of their Founder: *salvation history is still in process, and we are called to be protagonists in it as God's collaborators*.

It is an act of faith no easier, certainly, than De La Salle made three hundred years ago, and from which his work flourished. This is the forge of an authentic Lasallian spirituality for a new evangelization.