

LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY

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Introduction

According to McBrien, spirituality is a comprehensive term pertaining to our way of being Christian in response to the call of God, issued through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. He sees Christian spirituality as being rooted in the life of the triune God, centred on Jesus Christ, situated in the Church, ever responsive to the Holy Spirit, and oriented always to the coming of God's Reign in all its fullness at the end of history (2). From this perspective, Lasallian spirituality, that distinctive Lasallian way of living the Christian vocation, may be interpreted as the particular way in which St John Baptist de La Salle chose to respond to the different facets of his Christian call in 17th century France. Alternatively, rather than focus specifically on the Founder himself, one can approach the subject from the perspective of the lived reality of the Brothers and their colleagues in the Lasallian mission to-day - the distinctive way in which they are called to-day to live their Christian vocation by the power of the Spirit. This way of life obviously owes much to the original inspiration of De La Salle but equally it demands a constant openness to the challenges presented by the changing realities in which we find ourselves to-day. Our way of being Christian to-day will, therefore, have much in common with the experience of our Founder - many, if not all, of the basic principles underlying his Gospel journey remain valid for us to-day - but just as De La Salle used means which were appropriate to his cultural, religious and historical context so the means by which we pursue our own Gospel journey will be shaped by our cultural, religious and historical context. It is from this second perspective that I offer some personal reflections on my experience of three of the key components of Lasallian spirituality which I hope might be of value to all who make up the Lasallian Family.

Three key components of Lasallian Spirituality

1. Trinitarian

One of the constants of Lasallian Spirituality is its relationship to the God of Christian revelation. It was through a habitual, daily response to the "imperceptible" promptings (3) of a loving and faithful God in the realm of Christian education that De La Salle discovered his vocation as Founder which was to involve him in the saving mission of Jesus by the power of the Spirit. The importance of this trinitarian relationship is evident in many of the Founder's meditations but especially in the "*Meditations for the Time of*

Retreat" which represent the "full flowering" of his spiritual teaching on the vocation of the Christian teacher and which, as Miguel Campos has shown, continue to have contemporary relevance (4).

These meditations, a retrospective contemplation in the evening of his life on God's dealing with him through the successive stages of his spiritual journey (5), represent his "summit experience" (6). As the title page indicates, they were written for "*the use of all persons who are engaged in the education of youth*" but particularly for the use of the Brothers during their annual retreat, and they clearly present, from the same trinitarian perspective that was De La Salle's own experience, the ecclesial mission to which his followers are called: "...*God (who) is so good...desires that all of us come to the knowledge of truth...(which is) all that he has revealed to us through Jesus Christ...*" (MTR 1:1) All who exercise the Christian ministry of education, which De La Salle presents here in exalted and inspiring terms, do so as "*ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ*" in that they act as representing Jesus himself, an onerous responsibility which requires that they "*frequently give (themselves) to the Spirit of Our Lord*" (MTR 3:2).

While the Founder obviously sees these meditations as being applicable to the Brother, the fact that he addresses them to all "who are engaged in the education of youth" gives them an additional contemporary relevance in the context of shared mission with our lay colleagues who are thus invited to consider their educational work from a similar trinitarian perspective. He speaks of the ministry of the Christian educator in exalted terms - seeing the educator not only as an "*ambassador and minister of Jesus Christ*" but also, for example, as a "*minister of God and administrator of his mysteries*", "*co-worker with God in his ministry*" and a "*guide and guardian*" of those confided to their care - and he sees this ministry in collaborative terms, involving all those who have been called to "*procure His Glory*" (MTR 14:1) through the education of youth, especially those most deprived. With regard to the Brother himself, this trinitarian dimension is made unambiguously explicit in the Vow formula through which he consecrates himself to the "*Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit...to procure Your glory as far as I am able and as you will require of me...*" (R.25;cf also R.22) as well as in the daily experience of Mental Prayer where, before the loving gaze of this triune God (7), the Brother is invited to renew his consecration through the contemplation of the successive calls in his life (R.100) as well as through the presentation of the needs of those entrusted to his care. This loving God of salvation, who has been faithful to his people throughout history and who led De La Salle in his vocation as Founder, continues His work of salvation through the daily response of the Brother in the service of those confided to his care.

2. It involves an integrated vision of Christian life

In order to live this trinitarian relationship, the Christian educator needs to view reality through a particular perspective which De La Salle terms the spirit of faith through which one is led "not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God, and to attribute all to God" (RC 1718). Admittedly, De La Salle had his Brothers specifically in mind when he formulated this expression of the spirit of faith but, in the modern context of shared mission, it is clearly applicable to all who wish to live the ministry of education to the full since it is an invitation to contemplate the whole of one's life in all its complexity from a perspective permeated by a loving relationship with God sustained through regular daily prayer. Since authentic prayer is rooted in life, one of the practical expressions of this contemplation in the life of the Christian educator will be an "ardent zeal for the instruction of children and for bringing them up in the fear of God" (RC 1718). In this sense the Christian educator's prayer is apostolic and ecclesial - rooted in the reality of the Church's educational ministry and prompting him to return to that ministry, with specific names and faces in mind, "to teach them what God has communicated to you for them" (MTR 6:1). Thus, for the modern Christian educator, De La Salle's personal rule of making "no distinction between the matters proper to our state and those which refer to our salvation and perfection" (8), clearly has a contemporary relevance in helping to integrate spiritual and apostolic life. A further dimension of this integrated vision of Christian life, applicable to all engaged in the ministry of Christian education, is the need for such an educator to live authentically, to be the first witness to what he or she teaches. This crucial pedagogical insight - expressed in many places by De La Salle with unambiguous clarity as in, for example, "...if you want the instruction you give those whom you teach to be effective...you must practise these truths yourselves..." (MTR 2:3) (9) - was reiterated with equal power in a modern context by Paul VI, in "*Evangelii Nuntiandi*" (41), who suggested that "...Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses..."

In the context of the Brother's life this integration is expressed in the structure of the formula of vows through which he makes his consecration. The Brother's consecration to the "Most Holy Trinity" is explicitly focused in the community of the "Brothers of the Christian Schools" who have the specific educational mission of conducting, "together and by association, schools for the service of the poor". In this way, as the Rule indicates, their consecration "gives meaning to the specific commitments which it inspires and brings into unity the successive moments in the life of the Brother" (Art 22). This integration finds its clearest modern expression in Chapter 5 of the "*Declaration*" where the identity of the Brother is expressed in the interrelation and integration of these three basic elements of apostolic mission, religious consecration and community life which, as Luke Salm observes, was to become "an enduring contribution to a renewed understanding of the nature of the Brother's vocation" underpinning, for example, the call to individual responsibility for integrating these constitutive elements (10) in article 10 of the Rule. His absorbing description of the evolution of the Declaration during the 39th General Chapter makes fascinating reading enabling one to see how the Chapter in general, but the Apostolic Finality (11) Commission in particular, wrestled with this question of integration. No doubt that struggle in the Chapter to find the key to renewing the understanding of the Brother's vocation was

an indication of the lived reality of many Brothers who were finding difficulty in reconciling these daily responsibilities. Obviously, this tension did not disappear with the Declaration's formulation of the constitutive elements since this "ongoing process of interiorization and integration by which the Brother establishes his identity" (12) must find personal expression in the life of each Brother at every stage of his life (13).

3. Involves a dynamic reading of one's vocation

Rooted in this integrated, trinitarian vision of life, the Christian educator has a secure base from which to respond to the dynamic characteristic of his or her vocation as a Christian educator. This dynamic aspect stems from the fact that the revelational experience of the triune God is never a static encounter, limited to a particular time and space but rather involves a "call and response relationship" which draws the person ever more deeply into the mystery of this loving God. Once again, the model for the Christian educator in this is De La Salle whose own vocation as Founder evolved precisely through such a relationship in which "one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning" (14). Thus, Christian educators who daily embrace this ministry as "ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ" (MTR 3:2), obliged to "touch hearts" (MD 43:3), embark on a journey in which they act as agents of evangelization for those confided to their care and, at the same time, are drawn deeper into this mystery of the triune God as they become evangelized through the very children to whom they have been sent in what is, therefore, a process of mutual sanctification. Such an experience has ramifications in all aspects of the educator's life but especially in educational ministry where, as "good shepherds of their flock" (MD 33:1), they seek what is best for their pupils through, for example, detailed knowledge of each (MD 33:1), the presentation of material adapted to their level (197:1), and a willingness to correct them in an appropriate manner when necessary (MTR 203/204). This dynamic interpretation of one's vocation as a Christian educator thus encourages a pedagogical style which might be classed as "personalized education" (15) which, in turn, leads to the creation of a particular type of educational establishment - one which is centred on the young, adapted to the times, and which prepares pupils to take their place in society (R.13)

In the context of the Brother's particular vocation, this revelational experience of God as a dynamic phenomenon finds particular expression in article 100 of the Rule where the Brother is invited to recognise that his life "consists in a succession of calls from God to which he continues to respond." This search for the will of God to which the Brother commits himself is something which is lived out in the daily interplay of consecration, mission and community in a process which enables him to "grow continuously in fidelity" while responding to changing circumstances. These changing circumstances may relate, for example, to changing expressions of mission, to a changing understanding of religious life or to changing models of community or, perhaps, they may relate more directly to the psychological changes which impact on the Brother as he moves through the stages of life. However, whatever the nature of the changes, this commitment to seek God's will through the daily integration of the constitutive elements of his vocation provides the Brother with a solid Lasallian base from which to confront changing realities and, at the same time, enables him, regardless of age or ministry, to play his role in the vitality of the Institute

(R.145). It is from the experience of deep peace and contentment which flows from the harmonious integration of these elements that the Brother can articulate and live out with conviction the *raison d'être* for his happiness in being a Brother at whatever stage of life's journey he happens to be. Undoubtedly, the nature of his role will change with ageing and the consequent gradual withdrawal from a more active apostolate but the task of integration remains beyond "retirement" as the Brother continues to live out his consecration "in wisdom, age and grace" and, in so doing, gives further tangible evidence of the truth that *"the first apostolate of the Brothers consists in the witness of their consecrated life"* (R.24).

The dynamic understanding of one's vocation also provides a means by which each Brother can confront the ever-present necessity for true renewal of religious life expressed by Vatican II as a return to *"the original sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration of a given community...under the influence of the Holy Spirit"* (PC 2). The community dimension of such a "confrontation" is clearly paramount but the contribution of individual discernment also has an essential role to play if that community discernment is to have any real meaning. A willingness to engage in such discernment by the individual Brother also indicates a desire to personally appropriate the Lasallian charism, which is not something that is passed down on tablets of stone but rather involves *"a filial search accomplished by living men"* (D 6.2), as well as implying an openness to the "signs of the times" through which appropriate initiatives can be offered to contemporary needs given that yesterday's solutions have only limited relevance for the needs of to-day, let alone those of to-morrow. Such a dynamic concept of vocation thus enables one to make sense of the changing nature of the Lasallian mission but, at a more fundamental level, it also offers the possibility of positively interpreting the complexities of contemporary religious life to-day with its obvious signs of "diminishment" - ageing membership, decline in recruitment, dwindling financial resources in the face of relentlessly rising costs, loss of institutions, difficulties with regard to identity - all of which characterize the experience of many religious to-day, many of whom, according to Schneider, have the additional turmoil of *"trying to live a post-modern spirituality in a dying modern culture with the resources of a medieval theology and spiritual formation..."* (16)

There is no doubt that to view the current phenomenon of religious life with anything other than the "eyes of faith" is to reconcile oneself to a bleak future yet the pessimism which usually accompanies such a negative attitude flies in the face of the history of the People of God who have been accompanied in adversity through the ages by a faithful God; that faithful God who likewise guided De La Salle through the vicissitudes of his life so that, on his deathbed, he could still articulate that attitude of abandonment which had characterized his successive responses to his Master's call throughout his life - *"...I adore in all things the will of God in my regard..."* It is the same faithful God who continues to be faithful through the successive calls of my life, of our lives, as we daily seek to "procure His glory" in the changing reality that is contemporary Christian education. It is, in the final analysis, His work. Interpreting our vocation from this perspective of procuring "God's glory", we can thus respond with conviction to De La Salle's invitation to *"...pray to Him fervently...that He will be pleased to make your Institute grow and bear fruit day by day"* (MTR 15:3).

Conclusion

In this brief outline I have attempted to indicate three of the key components of Lasallian spirituality in a way that might make sense not only to the Brothers but also to the wider Lasallian family. To live such a spirituality authentically clearly implies that we live a particular style of life and that we take the means which will facilitate the growth of that spirituality. These means find different expressions (17) in the Lasallian tradition but a "constant" in all the expressions is daily personal prayer and it is to this theme in the life of the Brother that the second of these two articles is devoted.

(1) For a much more comprehensive treatment of this topic in English see, for example, *"The Origin and Spirituality of Teaching Orders in the Church"* by Michel Sauvage, translated from *"Dictionnaire de Spiritualite"* (Vol XI), in *"John Baptist De La Salle To-day"*, ed. William Mann (pp.24-57) and the combined presentation of *"John Baptist de La Salle: Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (1651-1719)"* by Maurice-Auguste Hermans and Michel Sauvage, translated from Vol VIII of *"Dictionnaire de Spiritualite"*, in *"Lasallian Spirituality Workbook"* (pp.27-41) by William Mann.

(2) McBrien, R., *"Catholicism"*, Geoffrey Chapman 1994 (3rd ed), p.1061.

(3) Blain, Vol 1, Bk 1, p.61 in English translation by Bro. Richard Arnandez.

(4) See pp.40-44 of Campos's introduction to the *"Meditations for the Time of Retreat"* in the English translation by Bro. Augustine Loes (1975).

(5) See article by Edwin Bannon, *"The Vocabulary of the Meditations for the Time of Retreat"*, in *Lasalliana*, 08-A-41.

(6) Campos's understanding of "summit experience" goes beyond the geographical and chronological meaning to encompass a "peak experience" in which De La Salle discovers a *"present moment that is loaded with the totality of a past history and which, at the same time, is fully open to all of the history that is to follow"* - p.17 of Campos's introduction to the *"Meditations for the Time of Retreat"* (1975).

(7) Note, for example, in the first part of De La Salle's *"Method of Mental Prayer"*, where the Brother is first invited to contemplate the mystery of God in a disposition of faith, adoration and thanksgiving and then, after reflecting on the reality of his own experience, is invited to take on the mind of Christ under the guidance of the Spirit.

(8) *"Rules which I have imposed upon myself"*, N° 3, in Blain, Vol II, p.318; English translation in *"De La Salle: A Founder as Pilgrim"*, p.143, Edwin Bannon, De La Salle Provincialate, London.

(9) See, for example, MTR 8:3; MSF 158 (St Bernard); MSF 98 (St Sulpice) for further examples of De La Salle's attitude to consistency between word and action.

(10) The relationship of the Declaration to the Rule of 1987 is succinctly expressed by Luke Salm as follows; *"...the definitive Rule of 1987 is but the end term of the process of renewed self-definition that has the Declaration as its foundation and point of departure...it is true to say that to understand the Declaration is to understand the Rule as it defines the identity and the mission of the Brother"* - *"A religious Institute in Transition: The Story of Three General Chapters"*, p.257, Christian Brothers Publications, Romeoville (1992).

(11) The use of this word in the 39th General Chapter is explained by Luke Salm as follows: *"...The word 'finality' as a literal translation of the French is ambiguous in English. 'Purpose' would be a*

better translation, but yielded to "finality" even in the English-language discussions. The word refers to the aim, the end-product, the reason for which the Institute exists..." See note on p.48 of "*A Religious Institute in Transition*".

(12) See Pastoral Letter of **Brother John Johnston**, "*Living Authentically in Christ Jesus*" (1994), p.24.

(13) Hence the frequent allusion to this theme in the Pastoral Letters of Brother Superior in recent years. See for example "*Transformation*", (1993), pp.19-20, or "*Representing Jesus Christ Himself*" (1990), pp.14-19.

(14) **Blain**, Vol 1, p.61 in the English translation by **Bro. Richard Arnandez**.

(15) See "*Characteristics of a Lasallian School To-day*", p.4, n7. For another perspective on the nature of the Lasallian School see "*Lasallians...without Frontiers, Our Challenge*", the address of Brother Superior to the Second Lasallian European Congress, (Strasbourg, 1994). pp.4- 12. These characteristics, along with the characteristics of the Lasallian educator, are also treated in the follow-up booklet to "*Characteristics of a Lasallian School To-day*"

entitled, in Spanish, "*En Orden a una Escuela Lasallista*", (Feb 1988).

(16) See **Schneiders'** essay, "*Contemporary Religious Life: Death or Transformation?*", in "*Religious Life: the Challenge for Tomorrow*", ed. C.J. Yuhaus, Paulist Press 1994, for a very perceptive interpretation of contemporary religious life in the context of the "Dark Night" of John of the Cross.

(17) See, for example, *Guide for Formation* (201) for an indication of the elements which, according to the Rule, help in the construction of the Brothers' Community; or p.22-42 of "*An Introduction to the Writings of John Baptist De La Salle*", by Saturnino Gallego, ed. William Mann (1993), on the spirituality of the Christian educator; in a recent article in the G.B. District Review, L.A.C.E., Damian Lundy presented these means in the context of the four "interior supports", "*namely the presence of God in daily life; the spirit of faith to which awareness of God's presence gives rise; daily personal prayer which fosters awareness of God's presence; personal recollection motivated by the spirit of zeal which overflows from these convictions*" (N° 4 Spring ed. p.21).