

## TO BE THE WORD IN ORDER TO PROCLAIM THE WORD

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For La Salle, it is faith which unifies the entire life of the Brother of the Christian Schools. The true Christian, affirming in the manner of St. Paul, lives the faith *"because he is guided by and works in an attitude of faith"*. Therefore, he adds, *"the Brothers have as the purpose of their Institute the education of the children who are confided to their care in the spirit of Christianity (...) looking at sentiments and maxims of faith as the rule of their actions and of all their conduct and on the spirit of faith as the spirit of their Institute"* (Rule of 1718, 11.1). (1)

### 1. Charism of the Founder.

The Institute was born out of the encounter of these two realities: **the human and spiritual abandonment of the children of the artisans and the poor**, who could not go to school, and **the contemplation on the part of John Baptist de La Salle of the salvific design of God** (cf. Rule 1), and he says in one of his Meditations: *"God wills not only that all come to the knowledge of truth, but also that all be saved. He cannot truly desire this without providing the means for it and, therefore, without giving children the teachers who will assist them in the fulfillment of his plan"* (Med. 193.3).

Since 1694, the vow formula, like the one used for the first perpetual vows pronounced in the birthing Society, begins like this: *"Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with profound respect before your infinite majesty, I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory as far as I shall be able and as you will require of me"*.

Two people meet in this process repeated thousands of time since then; the Brother: *"I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory as far as I shall be able"*; and God, since he does it as a **response to the ever-new call**, which he must continually discern: *"as...you will require of me"*. These are the two fundamental elements that were dominant in the birth of the Institute and that characterize it today: **the loving design of God**, on one hand, and **the necessity of a sacrament for this love** that reaches the children "of the artisans and the poor" on the other.

The Founder, in the common Rule of 1705, clearly spelled it out: *"The purpose of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children; and we have the schools with this goal in mind, so that, children being under the guidance of the teachers in the morning and in the afternoon, might be taught to live well and instructed in the mysteries of our holy Religion and inspired in Christian maxims and given in this way an educational which is suitable for them"* (CL 25, 16).

The purpose is very clear: **communion in the Christian mystery**. In order to obtain this, **two types of methods are**

**used**: one is direct, **the school** as the place where the educational action unfolds; and the other is more indirect, **the teacher-student relationship**, by which the beginning of the Christian mystery is fulfilled at the same time as the integrated education of the person. Priority must be given to the latter. It would be easy to imagine a Christian initiation made outside of the school schedule; but a school which does not engage in this type of interpersonal relationship where life witnesses to the teaching would be a Lasallian school in name only.

### 2. The Spirit of the Institute.

In order to exercise this ministry of Christian education, the Brother should be a **man of faith**, accustomed *"to see nothing except with the eyes of faith and to do nothing except with a look towards God and to attribute everything to God"* (CL 25, 18), that is to say, to see all the realities that surround him, people, things, events, with the eyes of Jesus, to pray with the heart in the hands of Jesus and to recognize God's action in the work of the world and to associate himself with it.

This profound faith at the same time makes the Brother a **man of zeal** in order to help young people fully develop their human and Christian potential, *"educating them in piety and in the true Christian spirit, that is, according to the rules and maxims of the Gospel"* (CL 25, 20).

The Gospel is, then, **the heart of the operative faith** of the Brother. In that way he can express his entire life in these two complementary expressions: **To be the Word in order to Proclaim the Word**.

## I. TO BE THE WORD

In order to correctly fulfill his ministry the Brother should be "entirely filled with God" (cf. Med. 100.2). Therefore La Salle never ceases insisting on the familiarity that his disciple should nourish with Scripture. As always, he gives the practical means for this: to always have the Scriptures within reach, to read them often, to study them seriously, to be habitually nourished by them and to practice them faithfully.

### 1. To always have the Word of God within reach.

The first means indicated by La Salle for enabling familiarity with Scripture is to always have the Word, at least the New Testament, within reach (CR 2.3) in order to be able to refer to it at any moment because these holy books contain

"all the treasures of God's knowledge and wisdom" (cf. Med. 170.1; 159.1). Isn't the Gospel for the Brother "*his first and principal rule*" (CR 2.3)?

## 2. Reading the Word often.

La Salle wanted the Brother to read the Scriptures several times per day (CR 27.8): in the morning after meditation, before beginning class (CR 9.3; CS 1.2), during the main meal, before spiritual reading, during supper, on feast days and even on trips (CR 24.6). Such an assiduously frequent contact with the Word could not help but leave a profound mark on the spirit and heart and help to create a new mentality and to stir up reflections of faith.

Without a doubt, this practice did not deal with his wishing to return to an ancient practice, but rather of showing the importance of an assiduous contact with the Word in order to transform one's way of thinking and working. Still today the Rule invites us to consider these ideas, leaving it up to each Brother and to each Community the care of determining the concrete ways for transforming the theory into reality (cf. Rule 6).

This daily reading cannot be lived in a routine way nor as a burden but, on the contrary, as a stroke of good fortune and an advantage (cf. Med. 84.1; 192.1 and 192.2), since these holy books are full of "*the truths of religion and the maxims of the holy Gospel*" (Med. 198.1) and "*ordinarily it is the reading of holy and pious books that fill us with his spirit (of God)*" (Med. 64.1). Therefore the Founder invites his disciple to read the Scriptures "*with attention*" (Med. 178.3), "*with attention and affection*", in order to enter into "*a close friendship with St. Paul*" (Med. 178.2) as with Jesus Christ. This reading will fill up the Brother in such a way with the Spirit of God that he will have the twofold advantage of learning to do all things with ease (cf. Meditation 192.1), and of knowing "*the means that he (Jesus Christ) used to lead his disciples to practice the truths of the Gospel*" (Med. 196.2).

## 3. Seriously placing oneself in the school of the Word.

La Salle remembers the principal motive so that the Brother might apply himself to seriously study the Word: it is God who sends the children to you "*so that you may give them the spirit of Christianity and educate them according to the maxims of the Gospel*" (Med. 37.2). The object of this study is, of course, all the "*Sacred books of Scripture, particularly the New Testament*" (Med. 170.1), and the Gospel in first place, "*the holiest maxims of Jesus Christ and the fundamental truths of Christian piety*" (Med. 167.2), and also the Epistles of St. Paul and St. James so that you always "*have the mind of putting it into practice*" (Med. 171.3).

Since one must "*know doctrine in order to teach it*" (cf. Med. 170.1), "*you should learn it well so that you possess it perfectly*" (Med. 116.2), since you "*may not ignore even the slightest thing with regard to these truths and maxims*" (Med. 198.1), and you should "*be thoroughly convinced of them*" (Med. 44.2), and possess all these truths "*sufficiently to make them understood clearly and in detail by your disciples*" (Med. 198.1).

And, La Salle adds, "*You are obliged, says Saint Augustine, to learn these things yourself; you have reason to be ashamed if you have to teach these children what you do not know yourself*" (Med. 37.2); and he even says in another part:

"*ignorance in you would be criminal, since it would cause ignorance in those who are entrusted to you*" (Med. 153.1).

Nevertheless, this study cannot be made with only human efforts, "*because the Spirit of God alone can give us a correct understanding*" (Med. 44.2). Full knowledge of the Word is the work of the Spirit, according to the words of Jesus: "*the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you*" (John 14:26). La Salle also exhorts his disciples to be completely available: "*Make yourself docile, therefore, to the Holy Spirit, who can in a short time procure for you a perfect understanding of these truths*" (Med. 44.2).

## 4. Nourishing oneself in the Word.

A rational study is not enough. One also needs to enjoy the Word under the action of the Spirit. Referring to the example of Ezekiel (2:8 - 3:3), La Salle says: "*these are the divine books which the true servant of God must devour and be filled with, in order to communicate their secrets and expound them in God's name to those whom they are bound to instruct and to form in the spirit of Christianity*" (Med. 170.1). And he returns to this image: "*nourish your soul daily with the holy maxims contained in this wonderful book (the Gospel), and make them familiar to you by often meditating on them*" (Med. 159.1).

## 5. Meditating on the Word.

In order to continue in the same line of thought, it would be well to remember the metaphoric character of the word **meditatio**, in Scripture as well as in spiritual vocabulary. Even in the Old Testament there is a physical auditory aspect associated with it. It will be sufficient for our purpose to cite two passages, the first from Joshua: "*This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate (murmur) on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it.*" (Joshua 1:8); and another well known verse from the Psalms: "*happy are those who delight in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night*" (Psalm 1:2). In the New Testament another well known passage helps us capture the meaning better: "*But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart*" (Luke 2:19).

The characteristic of the Christian meditation is, then, the remembrance and the repetition of the Word in order to make it nourish the soul. This is the origin of the term "*ruminatio*" which is used in Patriarchal and monastic literature up until the last stage of the modern Devotion at the end of the 15th century. Actually this deals with a second kind of experience of the Word, characterized by enjoyment or delight and tied to the lifting up of the "heart" to the heard Word. "On one hand, this deals with a frequent repetition, if not continuous; on the other hand, this deals with relishing and interiorly assimilating this word and making the repetition bear fruit" (3).

The *Dictionnaire universel*, among the different meanings of the word to meditate, presents this one: "*To meditate on the Gospel or meditate on the law of God is to fill one's spirit with the maxims and the truths contained in the entire Gospel; to continually occupy oneself with the law of God*" (4).

La Salle maintains this line of thinking when, speaking about spiritual reading, he exhorts his disciples: "*do not*

*hurry...pause every now and then to relish what you are reading*" (Rule 14). Therefore, after having read the Word frequently, having studied it carefully, and having been nourished by it daily, it would be fitting to develop a like for it, to relish it, to discover its quintessence. That is why he insists: *"be convinced that you will know the Gospel better by meditating on it than by committing it to memory"* (Med. 170.2).

The example of Saint Catherine, filled with *"the spirit of Christianity...took a long time, so that in the end her mind and heart were able to meditate on the truths learned in the divine Books..."* (Med. 192.1), served La Salle to remind the Brother that he has *"the advantage of meditating and reading the Gospel truths every day"* (Med. 84.1), and for exhorting the Brother to an assiduous meditation and making them *"familiar by often meditating on them"* (Med. 159.1), since *"what an admirable thing it is, and of what great help to those who wish to live in piety and in the practice of virtue, to meditate often on the holy and exalted maxims contained in Holy Scripture!"* (Med. 192.2).

## 6. Living the Word.

The Word, relished in this way, helps to give the Brother a new mentality, a transformed vision of people, things and events *"because it is living and effective, and penetrates more deeply than a two-edged sword; which...it penetrates even to the most hidden depths of soul and spirit"* (Med. 192.2). The Word brings out in the open the tendencies and feelings of the old man in order that these might be replaced *"with the disposition of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience"* (Colossians 3:12). The Brother need only live according to these holy maxims, and so La Salle says: *"Every day make it a point to practice one of them in particular"* (Med. 178.2). In this way the transformation and the interior conviction can express themselves and become perceptible and able to reach youth.

La Salle reminds the Brothers that it is *"your duty to teach your disciples every day to know God, to explain to them the truths of the Gospel, and to train them in their practice, you yourselves should be entirely filled with God...so that your words may have their proper effect on your disciples"* (Med. 100.2). And in another place: *"By your vocation you are obliged to announce the truths of the Gospel every day"* (Med. 138.3). And with great realism he adds: *"Do you wish your disciples to do what is right? Do it yourself. You will persuade them much more readily through your example of wise and prudent behavior than through all the words you could speak to them"* (Med. 33.2). And also: *"Preach by your example, and practice before their eyes what you wish to convince them to believe and do"* (Med. 100.2); *"practice, before you undertake to teach them to others, the truths of the Gospel that are required of all Christians"* (Med. 138.3). *"You have reason to be ashamed if you have to teach these children what you do not know yourself"* (Med. 37.2). One can see just how important it is that the life of the Brother be coherent with this teaching: *"Show, by the way your actions conform to these holy maxims, that, in fact, you do believe them by putting them into practice"* (Med. 84.1).

Everything we have seen up until now tends to have but one object: that the Word contained in the Scriptures, particularly in the New Testament and in the Gospels *"be a rule of conduct"* (Med. 170.1) for the Brother and for those confided to his care in order to make them *"live and act"* according to the Spirit of God. Only He *"can give us a correct*

*understanding and inspire us to put them into practice"* (Med. 44.2) since it is He who gives each the necessary gifts *"to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ"* (Ephesians 4:12-13).

## II. PROCLAIMING THE WORD

If we consider the second part of our title, we see that it is the result of the first part. Just as the Word had to become incarnated in order to become the sacrament of the love of God for mankind, so too the Word of God given us in Jesus Christ needs to be incarnated again in mankind to also reach people of every class and condition today. If the Brother is called to become the Word more and more, it is in order to bring the message of the love of God to young people and to make this message more perceptible and believable. He will therefore be able to carry out his role as the sacrament of the love of God in the workshop of the Christian life which is the Lasallian school.

### 1. The salvific Design of God.

The orienting principle for La Salle is the contemplation of the salvific design of God. His disciple should follow in his footsteps and cover the same journey. *"Admire this goodness of God, providing for all the needs of his creatures, taking the means to procure for us the knowledge of the true good, that is, the salvation of our souls"* (Med. 197.1), *"you are commissioned by God to instruct, reprove, correct and lead to piety the children who are entrusted to you"* (Med. 192.1), You are obliged *"to teach these holy maxims to the children you are charged to instruct"* (Med. 44.2). *"Offer yourselves to him for this purpose, to assist the children entrusted to you as far as he will require of you"* (Med. 197.1).

In order to do this one must enter into the mentality of God by means of a peaceful assimilation of his Word as we have seen before. That they *"are rules of conduct both for yourselves and for those whom you instruct"* (Med. 170.1), La Salle tells us. This Word *"will enable you to do all these things with ease"* (Med. 192.1) and *"make you entirely fit for your work"* (Med. 170.1).

### 2. The Sacrament of the love of God.

Jesus Christ is the sacrament of the love of God for mankind: *"God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him"* (1 John 4:9). By his life, teaching, death and resurrection he has made the love of God for mankind present and effective. La Salle reminds his disciples that since he has chosen them *"among so many others to be his cooperators in the salvation of souls"* (Med. 196.2), they should be, at the same time, the expression of the love of God for the children entrusted to them.

They should, then, like the apostles with Jesus, *"regulate and form themselves according to his conduct"*, in accord with the Master in order to continue their action together with youth: *"In reading the Gospel you must study the manner and means that he used to lead his disciples to practice the truths of the Gospel"* (Med. 196.2). The reading and meditation of

the Gospel will teach them the specifics of how to be signs of the love of God: *"Consider Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd of the Gospel who seeks the lost sheep, places it upon his shoulders, and carries it back to restore it to the fold. Since you are taking his place, look upon yourself as obliged to do the same thing. Ask him for the grace needed to procure the conversion of their hearts"* (Med. 196.1). It is the Gospel that will guide them: *"Attach yourself only to Jesus Christ, to his doctrine, and his holy maxims, since he has done you the honor of choosing you in preference to a great many others in order to announce these truths to the children who are his well-beloved"* (Med. 167.2). "It is according to these practices and all the others of Jesus Christ that you must teach the Christian youth entrusted to you" (Med. 196.2).

### 3. Christian Life Workshop

For La Salle, the school is the place for the integrated education of the child. Nevertheless, within this education Christian formation occupies the primary place: *"Your work does not consist in making your disciples to be Christians, but in helping them to be true Christians. This is all the more useful, because it would avail them little to have received baptism, if they did not live according to the spirit of Christianity"* (Med. 171.3). The school has for its purpose to teach them to live according to the **spirit of Christianity**: *"It is not enough that children be kept in school for most of the day and be kept busy. Those who have dedicated themselves to instruct them must devote themselves especially to bring them up in the Christian spirit"* (Med. 194.2). What ought to be understood by the spirit of Christianity but a life in accord with what Jesus called his commandment (John 15: 12, 17)? *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* (John 13:35)

Of course, one must guarantee that young people receive the necessary theoretical knowledge from any point of view; therefore it is the Brother's duty *"to teach your disciples every day to know God, to explain to them the truths of the Gospel, and to train them in their practice"* (Med. 100.2). *"You must for this purpose, the Holy Founder says, not only know all these truths in general, but it is also important that you have such a grasp on all of them that you are able to expand on them sufficiently to make them understood clearly and in detail by your disciples"* (Med. 198.1). What is true for religious knowledge is also true for other knowledge and preparation acquired in school.

Still, *"it is not enough to be instructed in the Christian truths purely to be saved...It is not sufficient to procure for the children the spirit of Christianity and to teach them the mysteries and the true facts of our religion; it is also necessary that you teach them the practical maxims that are in the holy Gospel"*, and the Founder goes on to say that is necessary, above all, to *"teach them the true practices of the faith of Jesus Christ, and the maxims of the holy Gospel"* (Med. 194.3).

The **maxims of the holy Gospel** (5), in effect, form a unity with the spirit of Christianity, since they are a means for acquiring it: *"God sends them to you so that you may give them the spirit of Christianity and educate them according to the maxims of the Gospel"* (Med. 37.2). *"In order to bring the children whom you instruct to take on the Christian spirit, you must teach them the practical truths of faith in Jesus Christ and the maxims of the holy Gospel with at least as much care as you teach the truths that are purely doctrinal"* (Med. 194.3).

The Lasallian school is a workshop where the Christian experience is found within the totality of school activities as

it will later will be found in the normal framework of life. Therefore it has an eminently practical character: *"It is, then, not enough to procure for children the Christian spirit and teach them the mysteries and doctrines of our religion. You must also teach them the practical maxims that are found throughout the holy Gospel"* (Med. 197.2). In order to realize this, each Brother is invited to play the role of the **visible messenger** of God with his disciples with a double task: *"1. You must help them understand the maxims as they are set forth in the holy Gospel; 2. You must guide their steps along the way that leads them to put these maxims into practice."* (Med. 197.2).

How is this task of God's messenger possible? It is a double movement, similar to the angels in Jacob's vision in Bethel: *"It is your duty to go up to God every day by 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 instruct them about what God has communicated to you for them in your prayer as well as in the Holy Scriptures, which contains the truths of religion and the maxims of the holy Gospel"* (Med. 198.1).

The entire life of the Brother consists, then, in these two inseparable movements: going up to God so that Spirit models him after Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate, as we saw in the first part; and then going to youth to place all the richness of the Word which was received within their reach, as a bird feeds its chicks: *"means which are easy and accommodated to their age"* (Med. 197.2)

One might consider this sketch to be too idyllic to be true and possible. Nevertheless, La Salle, to encourage the Brother in the ministry that God has entrusted to him, says: *"Ah! How powerful the word of God is to touch hearts. It is, says St. Paul, living and effective; it pierces the heart better than a two-edged sword; it enters and penetrates even to the secrets of the soul"* (Med. 180.2). This deals with touching hearts, which is not an easy task. One might think, perhaps, that our age does not lend itself for this enthusiasm of La Salle. Still, he gives us the secret in the same meditation: *"You can perform several miracles in regard to both yourselves and your work; in your own regard, by an entire fidelity to grace, not letting any movement of grace go by without corresponding with it; in regard to your work, by touching the hearts of the wayward children entrusted to your care; by making them docile and faithful to the maxims of the holy Gospel and to their practice. Such are the miracles that God gives you the power to perform, and which he asks of you"* (Med. 180.3). This work of grace is none other than that of the Spirit, who models the Word in the Brother to make of him a docile and effective instrument for the transformation of hearts.

On the feast of St. Bartholomew, who worked to proclaim the Kingdom and *"obtained such fruit through the preaching of the word of God and by frequent and assiduous prayer, which he in order to urge God to touch their hearts"*, La Salle takes advantage in order to remind his disciple of the secret of the unification of his life: *"he knew that he could not succeed in apostolic work without the special help of God, he applied himself very faithfully to prayer in order that God might give to all these people confided to him the grace to be docile to the work of Jesus Christ"* (Med. 159.2).

In this way, then, the Brother lets the Word be seen by the eyes of those confided to his care as a fruit of the intimate relationship to Jesus Christ: in that way he can fill the role of the sacrament of the love of the Father: *"You must, then, devote yourself very much to prayer in order to succeed in your ministry. You must constantly represent the needs of your*

*disciples to Jesus Christ, explaining to him the difficulties you have experienced in guiding them. Jesus Christ, seeing that you regard him as the one who can do everything in your work and yourself as an instrument that ought to be moved only by him, will not fail to grant you what you ask of him" (Med. 196.1).*

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(1) Abbreviations used. R: Rule; CL: Cahier Lasallien; CR: Common Rule; CS: Conduct of School.

(2) Cf. RC 30,19,10; 30, 19, 15; 30, 20, 8; 10, 20, 31; 30, 20, 39; 31, 2. In *Oeuvres complètes de S. J.-B.S., Brothers of the Christian Schools*, Rome, 1993, pp. 33-37.

(3) **F. Ruppert**, "*Meditatio-ruminatio, une méthode traditionnelle de méditation*", in *Collectanea cisterciana*, volume 39, 1977, pp. 81-93. Cf. *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, Beauchesne, Paris, 1980, col. 906-934.

(4) *Dictionnaire universel*, Arnould et Reinier Leers, La Haye, 1701.

(5) See the excellent study by **Brother Umberto Marcato**, "*Le massime del Vangelo nella formazione del fanciullo secondo S. G. B. de La Salle*", in *Rivista Lasalliana*, 29 (1962), Torino, pp. 142-190.