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Lasallian spirituality is not something that can be defined. It is not connected with any particular devotion or spiritual theory. Like a tradition, it exists only in a community whose members accept to live according to it and, in their turn, to pass it on.

The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools entered history as a spiritual inspiration which was transformed into reality. Describing the moment when the first group of schoolmasters was about to form a community, De La Salle's first biographer finds unexpected inspiration in the words of the Book of Revelation: "Now I am making the whole of creation new", and he goes on to add: "I make all things new through my servant". And when De La Salle was reaching the end of his life, he saw him as someone endowed with a special charism, as a person in whom the forces of creation had been at work.

However, it should be said from the start that in no area was it a question of creation "ex nihilo". De La Salle's educational and spiritual work was inspired by a number of different sources, it reflected current trends, and developed in a particular setting. His charism as a Founder was to have played his role successfully. In this role he undertook schemes that were original, provoked a great deal of opposition, brought about many changes, sometimes in a very decisive manner, and he fought many bitter battles.

#### The shock

In his native town of Rheims, in the reign of Louis XIV, De La Salle discovered a shocking contrast between two worlds which coexisted in the same town in total ignorance of each other. They were different in every way: in social status, social relations and cultural possibilities. Speaking of De La Salle's father, the biographer Maillefer notes that he had decided to give his son "an education suited to his birth". When De La Salle finally came into contact with a different kind of young person in Rheims, he realised with brutal clarity that, for a certain category of young people in his town, receiving an education suited to their birth was tantamount to condemning the children of the artisans and the poor to remain imprisoned in a vicious circle because of their family situation and social status. It was a world which was condemned in advance to perpetuate itself for ever.

He speaks of this in one of his Meditations:

*"Consider that it is only too common for the working class and the poor to allow their children to live on their own, roaming all over...The results of this condition are regrettable. These unfortunate children...have great difficulty when it comes time for them to go to work. In addition...they learn to commit many sins"* (MR 194,1).

The sentence that follows is a cry of victory:

*"God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune by the establishment of the Christian Schools, where the teach-*

*ing is offered free of charge and entirely for the glory of God"* (M. 194, 1).

In an other Meditation, in language that is typically precise and dense with meaning, he offers the reader a striking motive:

*"Your mission requires you to labour for the good of the Church and that of your country. Your pupils are already members of the State, and will soon be endowed with full citizenship"* (M 160,3).

Thanks to this intervention by the living God, the God of the History of Salvation, these children can be "saved" and so render greater service to the Church and State. With a good education, the lives of the artisans and the poor enter a new dimension. Such new ideas from an innovator were, to say the least, surprising in the middle of the 17th century; they were the words of a prophet. And De La Salle tells the Brothers to give thanks:

*"Thank God that he has had the goodness to call upon you to procure such an important advantage for children"* (M 194,1).

This initial shock stimulated concern not only for education, but also for the faith. It was more a process of interaction between the realities of life and living faith. These are the two elements of Lasallian spirituality and there is no dichotomy. The following extract from the Declaration explains this more clearly:

*"The Brother ought to have no fear of losing God when he goes among the young to serve them (Mk 10,44), nor of being estranged from Christ when he spends himself for men (2 Cor 12,15). On the contrary, the fulfilment of the authentic apostolate is a source for him of spiritual growth; in listening to men he disposes himself to listen more faithfully to the Word of God...Apostolic action degenerates into empty activity or into self-seeking only when one loses the ability to see the call of God in the real needs of the world. It is the awareness of these needs that leads the Brother to give himself to prayer, to turn always more and more to God who alone is capable of building his kingdom"* (D. 25,2).

#### This initial shock creates Lasallian Christocentricity

The Christ that De La Salle contemplates is constantly "wounded" by what he sees. For if it is true that the SALVATION of God, brought about by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is made present by the Spirit in the Church, it has to be said also that, for the young people he sees each day, this reality of faith is "unreal". The world as they see it challenges and damages their faith. We should read again from this point of view the numerous texts of the Founder which invite us "to recognise Jesus Christ under the rags of the children", and which urge us to respect in these abandoned children the dignity of the sons of God.

We need to go even further than this. According to De La Salle, this initial shock is simply the repetition in human history of the same shock that God feels because of his love for humanity.

*"You must imitate God...for he so loved the souls he created that, when he saw them involved in sin and unable to free themselves, his zeal and desire for their salvation led him to send his only Son to rescue them from their miserable condition. This is what made Jesus Christ say that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him may not die, but may have eternal life" (M 201,3).*

This is where our commitment to the educational service of young people must constantly renew its dynamism and its confidence.

### **Lasallian spirituality and our MINISTRY as Brothers. The teacher, a "minister" of grace.**

This contemplation of the love in God's heart which is sensitive to the distress of mankind is what Lasallian spirituality is based on. From this contemplation, spiritual and apostolic enthusiasm is constantly generated in the Brother's heart, and translates itself into practical concrete action in the exercise of his "ministry" as an educator.

"See what God and Jesus Christ have done to restore souls to the grace they had lost. What must you not do for them in your ministry if you have a zeal for their salvation" (M 201,3).

We see here once again how the Founder reminds his followers of their daily tasks and encourages them explicitly to be creative: "What must you not do for them..." Our spirituality of "service" presupposes an ability to be creative and inventive.

The Christocentricity of Lasallian spirituality consists in being the minister of Jesus, because it is our task to make present today, in the small portion of humanity that has been entrusted to us, "what God and Jesus Christ have done" once and for all, for the whole of humanity:

*"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 teaching as if he were teaching them....it is only in his name that you teach" (M 195,2).*

What is fundamental and original in this spirituality is that De La Salle does not dissociate interior dynamism from what is often its quite ordinary visible effect. He finds it quite normal to say to us: "If you wish to be successful in your ministry, give yourself often to the Spirit of Jesus Christ". This is the interactive dynamism of our spirituality, and the Church has set its seal of approval on it in a very special way in the last 20 years by raising to the altars 22 of our Brothers.

All these Brothers, with their own special charism, with their different nationalities and cultures, have exercised one and the same ministry in the Church:

**Brother Benilde:** 40 years headmaster of a country school in the village of Saugues in the Massif Central. Canonised in 1967.

**Brother Miguel:** Ecuadorian, academic, catechist and author of school textbooks. Canonised in 1984.

**Brother Mutien:** from Malonne, Belgium. An obscure music teacher in classes for beginners, and a supervisor always saying the rosary. Canonised in 1989.

**Brother Arnould:** a Frenchman from Lorraine. Excellent teacher of agronomy, becomes Director of novices and of a retreat centre for young people. Beatified in 1987.

**Brother Scubilion:** left his native Burgundy to spend 34 years of his life serving the slaves on the Ile Bourbon. Beatified in 1989.

**Brother Solomon:** martyred during the French Revolution. Beatified in 1926.

**Brother Jaume Hilario:** Martyred for being faithful to his vocation as an educator. Beatified in 1990.

**Brother Cirilo Bertran and 7 other Brothers** martyred at Turon, in the Asturias, Spain. Beatified in 1990.

**Brother Aurelio Maria and 6 other Brothers** martyred in Almeria, Spain. Beatified in 1993.

Different facets of the same spirituality, these are proofs of sanctity that cannot be denied.

### **Our "ministry" in the symphony of the Body of Christ**

I think that this is the crowning point of De La Salle's charismatic vision. As if it were the natural thing to do, he used his competence in Scripture and theology to build up on the basis of the Brothers' daily lives - their religious consecration, their secular commitments, their common life - an original Christological way of thinking:

*"It is for the Church (which is the body of Christ) that you work. You have become her ministers through the commission God gave you to preach his word to these children...[who] form this building on the foundation of the apostles, a building raised up by Jesus Christ who is the capstone" (M 201,2).* Once again we see the originality of our spirituality. The Institute exists for the Kingdom of God; we become Brothers for the Kingdom of God. Apostolic finality is what really defines the Institute and the religious life of the Brother. There is nothing in the Founder's thinking which recalls the "double aim" of some religious institutes, a double aim which, sometimes, they have subsequently tried to merge.

We do not become Brothers first of all to sanctify ourselves and then to pursue an apostolate: we become Brothers to answer the call of God who sends us to work for his Kingdom. The religious dimension is not subordinated to that of action, nor the person to his function. The apostolate is something dynamic and personal. It encompasses the whole life of the Brother, penetrating to the very depths of his being. Our "ministry" has a score to play in the symphony of the Body of Christ:

*"Let your zeal give tangible proof that you love those whom God has entrusted to you just as Jesus Christ has loved his Church. Help them enter truly into the structure of this building and be able one day to come before Jesus Christ full of glory, without stain, or wrinkle, or blemish. In this way God will be able to display to the ages that are to come the great wealth of his favour to them, which he accomplished by procuring them the help of education. It is for you to give them this education and training, so that they may become heirs of the kingdom of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord" (M 201,2).*

It could not be put more clearly: the unifying principle of our spirituality is not a theme nor an idea. It is a living presence, a power that acts and transforms, the Spirit of Jesus.

## Corollary: The impact of "What must you not do for them"

### 1. De La Salle implements in a concrete way the spirituality of this ministry in his own life.

Up to 1680, despite numerous praiseworthy attempts, no one had ever actually "SUCCEEDED" in doing something educational for working-class boys.

All previous efforts had been defeated by three obstacles, denounced also by De La Salle's contemporaries: schools were inaccessible to those who could not pay; they were not suited to the needs of the working classes; there were no competent and dedicated teachers. De La Salle's merit is to have provided solutions that were practical and not theoretical to overcome these three obstacles.

The first biographer of De La Salle was right to refer to the Book of Revelation when speaking of him: "I renew all things through my servant". 30 years after his death, there were 100 Brothers, 25 communities and 9,000 pupils.

\* His charism as a Founder is shown concretely by the way he brought together a number of schoolmasters and formed them into a community. He did so in order to make them realise gradually the sublime nature of their role as "ministers" of God, Jesus and the Church; to consolidate their vocation and to ensure they had adequate professional training.

\* The Lasallian Congregation was to be composed of lay religious, subject to a superior chosen from their number and elected by them, observing Rules that were original, and following a lifestyle hitherto unknown. They would not be schoolmasters but Brothers of the Christian Schools. It would be difficult to think of a better way of being close to the pupils, of changing teacher-pupil relations: this relationship would no longer be one of dominance and impersonal; it would be personal, like that of elder brothers.

In the aloof world of a clerical Church, Lasallian spirituality created a Church that was the People of God. De La Salle made his Brothers aware of the dignity of their position in the Church. Through them, there arose in the Church a different sort of Gospel "ministry". De La Salle gave up his canonry because he came to realise that it was incompatible with wanting to share fully in the daily lives of the schoolmasters. It is worth noting that 18 similar institutes of pontifical right and marked by the same spirituality were founded during the course of the following 100 years or so.

De La Salle's vision was that of a true precursor. The existence of lay religious educators showed that the love of Christ and the love of young people in Christ were of themselves a sufficient motive to make a person consecrate his whole life to God. We can recall at this point the words of John Paul II on January 31st 1988, on the occasion of the centenary of the death of St John Bosco:

"Never before has the world been in such great need of persons and communities that exist only for the sake of education and which, considering it unequivocally their primary aim, devote all their energies to it, in order to discover, through their creativity, new educational approaches".

It was for these reasons that a religious family with Lasallian spirituality was born in 1680.

\* These creative forces in education, put at the service of hitherto abandoned young people, were already at work during De La Salle's lifetime. There were:

- Free schools for the children of the artisans and the poor (other kinds of children were not excluded);
- Sunday Schools for young workers;
- Schools providing professional and commercial courses;
- A boarding school providing corrective training for difficult children;
- A detention centre for persons imprisoned by "lettre de cachet";
- A training centre for country schoolmasters;
- A boarding school for modern teaching;
- The teaching of reading through the mother tongue;
- Christian education and training in politeness included in the instruction given to the working-classes;
- Intransigence over providing free education;
- Transformation of teacher-pupil relationship.

### 2. The Institute has followed in the footsteps of its Founder

Over the course of 3 centuries of "ministry", in 81 countries, this same Lasallian charism has enabled our Institute to continue to be sensitive to issues that are similar to those faced by the Founder. This charism has enabled it to invent new educational structures. The words of the Founder, "What must you not do for them...", have led us to come into contact with other nations and cultures, and to tackle the new problems experienced by young people today, problems that take the form of various kinds of distress: material, affective, cultural; distress from failure in school, from the struggle to find work; distress from indifference or lack of faith; distress from unjust situations and oppressive regimes...

Our work, in all its varied forms, is very much concerned with care for young people: for refugees, displaced people, drug addicts, children of prisoners, orphans, illiterate children, delinquents, young delinquents, mutilated children, unemployed young people, the blind, lepers...

The Brothers have remained faithful to the creative vision of the Father: they have continued to remain close to their pupils and to adapt their schools constantly to their needs so that they may attain the dignity of the sons of God. The best work on Lasallian spirituality is the one that the children of the Canon of Rheims write daily by their efforts, not on paper, but on the heart of the world.

There can be no better conclusion than the following extract from our Rule:

*"The Spirit of God has given to the Church, in the person of St John Baptist de La Salle, a charism which even today inspires the Brothers and a great number of other educators.*

*"The Brothers live their faith as a gift to be used for their ministry of Christian education. In faith they contemplate God as the one who chooses them to be workers, bringing his salvation to the least and to the poorest.*

*"Together and by association they labour to accomplish God's saving work in a profession where «the poor have the Gospel preached to them» and where young people grow as human persons and children of God. In faith, the Brothers praise God as they see his kingdom being extended" (Rule 20).*