

**TOWARD THE
CONTINUING FORMATION
OF THE LASALLIAN EDUCATOR (1/3)**

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Note: Though the English text used for the Meditations for Sundays and the Principal Feasts is taken from De La Salle: Meditations, ed. by W.J. Battersby, Ph.D. New York Longmans, Green and Co., 1953, the numbering system used is the one found in the French edition of 1922 (Paris: Procure Générale, cinquième édition) since most works based on these writings published since then have followed this particular numbering system. (See Cahiers lasalliens 12.)

Quite likely the recent appearance of the *Guide for Formation* (Rome: General Council, 1991, henceforth referred to as *Guide*) has stimulated interest in the formation of the Brothers of all ages, beginning with, but not confining itself to, that of the subjects in initial formation. Also, its concluding chapter dealing with "Continuing Formation" will possibly remind all concerned of the importance of this process in the life of each Brother. Likewise, this publication might recall the importance the *Declaration: The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today* (Rome: Thirty-ninth General Chapter, 1967, henceforth referred to as *D*) gave to on-going formation in the life of the Brother. Finally, reading one or both of these documents might also remind us that continuing formation was a matter of great importance to our Founder, St. John Baptist de La Salle, one which he stressed very much in the writings he composed for his religious sons, such as his two sets of subjects for meditation.

When discussing the various facets of the life of the Brother, whether in his meditations or elsewhere, the Saint placed great importance on his apostolate, the spirit which should inspire it, and the activities which it should lead him to undertake. In the *Rule* this is seen when he linked all of these directly to the Spirit of Faith, the Spirit of the Institute, of which he said that it was "of the utmost importance", and the matter "to which the greatest attention should be given ..." (*The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*. Rome, 1987. 15, henceforth referred to as *Rule*) This he did when he asserted:

Secondly, the spirit of their Institute consists in an ardent zeal for the instruction of children, and for bringing them up in the fear of God, inducing them to preserve their innocence if they have not lost it, and inspiring them with a great aversion and horror for sin and whatever might cause them to lose purity.

In order to enter into this spirit, the Brothers of the Society shall strive by prayer, instruction, and by their vigilance and good conduct in school, to procure the salvation of the children confided to their care, bringing them up in piety and in a truly Christian spirit, that is, according to the rules and maxims of the Gospel. (*Rule*, 16-17)

Therefore it should come as no surprise that a number of ideas mentioned here, such as zeal, the educational objectives of the Christian Schools, how the Brother is to become and remain an effective apostle, and the specific means to be employed in this work, are recalled frequently in all of his writings for his religious sons, such as his two sets of meditations.

Because of their very name, it seems only natural that the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* (Winona, Minnesota: St. Mary's College Press, 1975, henceforth referred to as *MTR*) would deal with matters essential to the life of the Brother such as his school apostolate. Composed specifically for persons engaged in this work, they were used during the annual retreat to remind the Brothers of their duties as educators and to exhort them to perform them well. At the same time, these Christian teachers would be instructed regarding various aspects of their apostolate and reminded of its importance in and for the Church. (W.J. Battersby, Ph.D., ed. *De La Salle: Meditations*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1953. xxix-xxxi, henceforth referred to as *MSF*.)

The longer collection of meditations, *Meditations for Sundays and the Principal Feasts*, also discussed these matters at some length. Intended by their author to be practical rather than philosophical in nature, each meditation drew from a Sunday gospel or the life of a Saint some ideas that suited his purpose. Then, appealing to "the intellect, the common sense, and the sense of duty of his readers", briefly he developed an idea and immediately drew an application from it. Naturally he insisted on the duties essential to the Brothers' state of life. And by way of a summary, it might be noted that in 23 of these 192 meditations all three points are devoted to topics related to Christian education, while 57 others devote one or two of their points to this topic. And,

Whatever may be the extent of De La Salle's indebtedness to other authors, and whatever may be the defects in his style and composition, ... the Meditations retain the stamp of his own character and personality, and form a very effective and impressive collection of spiritual writings. The salient points in the Lasallian system of spirituality stand out in them in sharp relief... the recurrence of the same ideas in identical phrases, leave no possible doubt regarding the Saint's personal convictions and spiritual outlook. Nobody can read the Meditations without being impressed with ... a profound conviction of the greatness of the work of Christian education. (*MSF* xxviii-xxix; see also Jean-Guy Rodrigue, FSC, *Contribution à l'étude des sources des "Méditations sur les principales fêtes de l'année."* Cahiers lasalliens 47. Rome: Maison Saint Jean-Baptiste De La Salle, 1988.)

Against this background, some specific ideas the Founder wanted his disciples to ponder repeatedly so as to implement them more fully in their lives with a view to becoming better apostles in their schools can be considered.

First of all, De la Salle repeatedly reminded the Brothers of the ardent zeal which should animate their work. At least 33 meditations composed for the feasts of Saints, beginning with that of St. Andrew, Apostle, on 30 November (*MSF* 78:2), and ending with that of St. Martin of Tours (*MSF* 189:2,3), mention this virtue. Others which refer to this spirit include those for Saints Stephen (*MSF* 87: 2, 3), Paul the Apostle (*MSF* 99 :1, 2; 140 :1), Ignatius of Antioch (*MSF* 102:1), Leo the Great (*MSF* 114:2), Barnabas (*MSF* 128:1,3), Ignatius of Loyola (*MSF* 148:2,3), Cassian (*MSF* 155:1), Cyprian (*MSF* 166:2), Denis (*MSF* 175:2), and Charles Borromeo (*MSF* 187:1,2,3), as well as some 20 others (See *MSF* 79:3; 81:2; 97:3; 101:3; 109:3; 119:3; 128:1,3; 135:2; 136:3; 145:3; 150:2; 160:2; 162:2; 167:3; 168:3; 169:2,3; 171:2; 180:1,2,3; 181:1; 186:2,3). However while trying to stimulate the zeal of his disciples, the Saint retained a realistic outlook on life. He told the Brothers to

expect difficulties as well as outright persecution because they were zealous to do the work of God so as to build his kingdom on earth. To make his point, he cited the experiences of Apostles such as St. James the Greater (*MSF* 145:3), illustrious bishops and doctors of the Church such as St. Athanasius (*MSF* 120:3), or those he considered as special models and patrons of teachers such as St. Cassian (*MSF* 155:3), as well as those of a number of other Saints (See *MSF* 100:3; 126:2; 162:3; 167:3; 175:3; 182:2). Even here, though, his purpose was to arouse his disciples to action, not to discourage them or to turn them from their apostolate. Now, who were to be the objects of this zeal?

According to the Founder, the Brothers were to work with and for poor children, "to procure their salvation". (*Rule* 16-17) As regards these young people the Saint took an attitude at once realistic and well-balanced. To begin with he described their situation thus:

... it is only too common for the working class and the poor to allow their children to live on their own, roaming all over as if they had no home, until they are able to be put to work. These parents have no concern to send their children to school ... and leave their children to fend for themselves.

The results ... are regrettable. These unfortunate children, accustomed to an idle life for many years, have great difficulty when it comes time for them to go to work ... through association with bad companions they learn to commit many sins which later on are very difficult to stop. ... (*MRT* 2:1)

At the same time, each student must be seen as an individual who has to be known and understood as such by a teacher who acts toward him in keeping with his character and disposition. (*MSF* 33:1; 56:1) Likewise, he is an emotional person who will respond in kind to the actions of the one entrusted with taking care of him. Aware of these things, and because he looks on his charges "as members of Jesus Christ and as His much loved ones", the Brother should both respect and love his pupils. (*MSF* 80:3) This will lead him to show a tenderness toward them which will make it possible for him to touch as well as to win their hearts, something which is necessary to make his work effective in their regard. (*MSF* 98:3; 115:3; 134:2) At the same time, though, many if not all of these young people are quite poor. But the Brother should consider it an honor to be entrusted with these "children of God Himself", the poor. (*MSF* 133:2) And if he shows preference for any of his charges, it should be for the poorest among these poor. In this way he will imitate such Saints as Cyprian and Francis of Assisi as well as Jesus himself. (*MSF* 97:3; 143:2; 166:2; 173:1)

But De La Salle saw another side to the students, one of which the Brother who worked with them in his classroom on a daily basis, would be only too aware. Because they were born with original sin and often lived in a less than favorable environment, these young people were naturally and strongly inclined to do wrong and to commit sin. At times they seem to find pleasure only in committing sin and do so without reflecting on what exactly they are doing. (*MRT* 11:2) To prevent them from developing bad habits and from falling completely under the influence of such habits, their teacher must correct them when they do wrong. (*MRT* 11:3) However, taking a positive approach, the Brother should also pray for these students, asking God to help them overcome their bad habits so that they can both avoid sin and live a life worthy of children of God. (*MSF* 56:3; *MTR* 4:1) By doing these things, even when the Christian teacher sees and accepts the sinfulness of his students, he will continue to see the good in them while trying to help them to realize it in their lives. Some reflection on all these ideas of the Saint

might suggest that in his own way he was stating what was later said in the *Declaration*, "the Brother is with the students . . ." And since education is seen as "... a fraternal relationship" between the teacher and his pupils, in effect

The Brother enters totally into the life of the students; he shares their interests, their worries, their hopes. He is less a schoolmaster ... than ... an older brother who helps them ... discover their true place in the world. (*D* 40.4)

If the Brother was to have a high opinion of the young people who provided him with the opportunity to exercise his zeal, he was to have at least an equally high opinion of the work he performed. Only faith could inspire him with such sentiments, for it alone would show him how necessary educating the young is for laying the foundation of the Church and building up the people of God. (*MTR* 7:1.2.3) Enlightened by faith, though, like his patron St. Cassian he would see his work not from a human point of view but as the exalted and important task it is in the Church. (*MSF* 61:1; 131:3; 155:1) For

... God diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge throughout the world by human ministers ... those whom He has called to announce His word to children, to enlighten them ...

... God ... has given you such a ministry. ... (*MTR* 1:1)

In performing his work, then, the Brother was to see himself as a man chosen by God to announce the Gospel to children, and as standing between them and God so as to bring them to Him by making them aware of "... the good news of the reign of God ..." (*MSF* 109:3; 137:3; 145:3; *MTR* 6:2; 7:2) And without the intervention of their Christian teacher, these children would be "poor, abandoned orphans" as far as God and their religion are concerned. This is because many parents neglect or do not even attempt to perform their basic and essential task of teaching religion to their children. But, appointed by God, the Brother remedies this unfortunate situation by taking "the place of fathers and mothers in fulfilling this responsibility". (*MSF* 37:3; *MTR* 1:2) So primarily, the Christian teacher sees himself as one chosen by God and entrusted with the treasure of faith he is to share with his students. And he is happy to be called to such an important role in the Church. (*MSF* 61:2; 79:3) Difficult as it might be to deal with these poor youths on certain occasions, and hard as the work might be at times, De La Salle assured his disciples it could also be a source of joy for them. Even in this world, the teacher would be very happy when he saw his former students "living honorably and reverently, far from any unjust association, and performing good deeds" (*MTR* 15:3) because of the influence he had exerted on them. Another occasion would be in heaven, when the Brothers will see "a great number whom they have helped to attain so great a happiness!" (*MTR* 16:2) Also, they will experience great joy in the glory they enjoy "when their zeal and devotion to procure the salvation of children will be made public before the whole world!" (*MTR* 16:3) An awareness of these things should elicit mixed reactions from a Christian teacher. Certainly he should thank God for calling him to so holy a state. (*MSF* 99:1) But at the same time a Brother should recognize that he is "but the voice that disposes hearts to receive Our Lord and His holy doctrine". And "the one who really disposes them, and the one who gives efficacy to his words, is none other than God Himself. ... (*MSF* 3:1) Then a Brother would be led to ask how he might make himself as effective an instrument as possible for doing God's work in the school.

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