

ST. LA SALLE AND SACRED SCRIPTURES (1/2)

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Reflecting on the lives of spiritual giants in Christianity who are also founders of religious institutes or congregations, one finds three common strands: the love for Sacred Scriptures, the shadow of the cross, and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. These are common threads in the fabric of their lives with varying textures according to the particular vocations and charisms of each founder. In La Salle's admonition to his confreres, these spiritual dimensions are manifested when he urged them to keep three religious objects for their use: a New Testament, a crucifix, and a rosary (Wright, 1995, p. 23; cf. RC; 17,3).

When I attended the early lectures on St. John Baptist de La Salle sponsored by Signum Fidei, DLSU Chapter, I learned that the Lasallian spirituality is biblically oriented. But only when I began reading background materials on his life and works did I realize the extent of its scriptural foundation. I wanted to find answers to the following questions: What were the theological orientations of St. La Salle and the approaches to biblical interpretation typical of his time? How did he apply Sacred Scriptures to the Rules of the Institute, in his correspondences, to his personal prayer, meditations, and devotion to Mary? What were his favorite scriptural passages? How did his life reflect the values of the Gospel?

Theological Orientations

He received the necessary academic preparation: a degree of Bachelor of Sacred Theology, a Licentiate in Sacred Theology, and a Doctor of Theology. At the Seminary of Saint Sulpice where De La Salle enrolled, he was greatly influenced by Father Louis Tronson who emphasized the interior life, spirituality and "the need for serious study, especially of theology and Scripture" (Salm, 1989, p. 272). Among the courses he had taken during his theological formation was *Lectures on the Old and New Testament as interpreted by the Fathers of the Church*. Since his biographers claim that St. Augustine, more than any Father of the Church, had influenced La Salle, he must have adopted the following approach to the reading of Sacred Scriptures as recommended by St. Augustine:

"In all these books those who fear God and are of a meek and pious disposition seek the will of God. And in pursuing this search the first rule to be observed is, as I said, to know these books, if not yet with the understanding, still to read them so as to commit them to memory, or at least so as not to remain wholly ignorant of them..." (Christ. Doc.).

La Salle must have also followed a spiritual and allegorical interpretation of the Bible by the Church Fathers. It was more than two centuries after his time before Pope Pius XII promulgated his great encyclical, "Divino Afflante Spiritu" (September 30, 1943), the Magna Carta of Catholic Biblical Scholarship which encouraged new critical methods in biblical interpretation.

The methodology in vogue at the time was the traditional scholastic theology where students were trained in and expected to master the art of argument beginning with an argument from authority, then from reason, and a systematic and logical presentation of theological questions through definition and distinction of terms and propositions. This is the approach that we find in St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*.

Bro. Luke Salm describes the effect of the pedagogy of the time in the formative years of De La Salle:

"...The emphasis was on memory and technique rather than on personal conviction, and not at all on creative or critical independent thought... This kind of training left its mark on John Baptist de La Salle. During his entire life he displayed a prodigious memory, a detailed acquaintance with Sacred Scripture and the Church Fathers..." (1989, p. 21).

Although memorization was required of the students in the Christian Schools, La Salle instructed the Brothers to take care that the students understood what they memorized to sustain their interest (Aroz et al., 1980, p. 103).

While there are some pedagogues today who disapprove of rote memory, I think that the training of memory also has a positive value. From personal experience, I remember that my initial attraction to the Bible was through the lyrical beauty of the psalms and the Book of Job. There must be a mystery ineffable that touched someone to call on God out of the depths of his being; an experience of the transcendent which could transform a person into a poet and a mystic. As I reread my favorite passages, I had committed them to memory. But it was much later that they resonated mercifully as I groped for inner resources to pull me through most trying times. Theologians speak of the redemptive role of memory. It is no wonder that the Bible is sometimes described as narratives of shared memories.

Boomershine prescribes a faithful recall of biblical stories and compares the process to a jazz pianist who has to learn a classic tune in its original form; only after he has mastered the music can he improvise confidently and accurately (1988, p. 31).

Sacred Scriptures in Selected Writings of La Salle

Although John Baptist de La Salle used Scriptural passages liberally in his writings, his biographers claim that seldom would he cite his sources. The scholars and translators of his works were responsible for the identification of the sources of the biblical quotations. An impressive achievement if not a most tedious work are the following statistics on La Salle's use of scriptural quotations gathered by Adrien Roche (Gallego, 1993, p. 19):

The Old Testament: 899 quotations. Judges and the six minor prophets are not quoted. As one might expect, the Psalms take the lion's share (222 quotations); and among them, the Fifty-first (the Miserere) appears 17 times.

The New Testament: 3,972 quotations. All the books are quoted, but the Pauline epistles are quoted 1,165. There are 1,732 quotations from the synoptics.

Why are there so many quotations from the Psalms and why is there a more frequent use of the *Miserere*? We can come up with probable reasons: the Psalmody is a book of prayer among the Israelites which reflects their awareness of the presence of God; it serves as the people's response to God's revelation in their history. We can easily identify with the sentiments expressed in most of the psalms and make them our own prayer. Canon Blain cites La Salle's fondness for the 11th Chapter of Hebrews regarding the heroes of faith—patriarchs and saints of the old Law. Why the frequent penitential psalms, the *Miserere*? Bro. Edwin provides an explanation: "In the spirituality of the 17th century, self-effacement by mortification was the recognized means of leaving the field free for the divine action. The will to maintain the undertaking of the Christian Schools in the line intended for it by divine Providence was the motivation for what Blain calls M. de La Salle's "holy excess" in the spirit of penance." La Salle has recommended vicarious satisfaction for infidelities within the community which could threaten the enter-prise of the school.

"The spirituality he offered his Brothers invited them to apply to themselves the mysteries of Christ revealed in the New Testament, imitating his virtues made familiar to them by constant meditation thereon, drawing upon his merits for their progress in holiness and the fruitfulness of their apostolate" (Bannon, 1988, p. 149). The New Testament list shows the Pauline influence on the thought of the Founder. One observation is that "the citations of St. Paul are, in fact, literal; we must presume that the Founder worked with a New Testament constantly at hand and actually copied out certain passages directly" (Sauvage and Campos, 1981, pp. 56-57).

In the Rules of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, La Salle affirmed that the spirit of their Institute is first, a spirit of faith and the most efficacious means to enter into this spirit is to have a profound respect for the Holy Scriptures. This profound respect for the Holy Scriptures can be manifested, according to the Founder, when they always carry the book of the Holy Scriptures and read some part of it daily in a spirit of faith.

He has also recommended scriptural passages which the Brothers can pray or meditate on so that all their actions may be animated with sentiments of faith. They have to recite these scriptural texts when rising in the morning, when putting on one's robe, when washing, at vocal prayer, at mental prayer, entering the church or oratory, at meals. There is a prescribed biblical text for almost every movement. Sometimes the choice of scriptural passages for some activities may jolt the reader, for one can think of better or more appropriate text. It is possible that knowing the *sitz-im-leben* then will shed light on personal preferences of La Salle for those quotations.

Still in the Collection, he reminded the Brothers: "Are you familiar with some verses of the Psalms or other books of Holy Scriptures? Learn by heart some passages of the Imitation of Christ, or other books that you read....When you have read or heard the word of God, have you made a personal application thereof? Have you examined how far your interior conduct is in conformity or at variance with the truth announced?"

As a Religious Studies teacher, I am elated to read St. John Baptist de La Salle's priority on religious education, as in his admonition to his Brothers that their role should be first and foremost "catechists", "ministers of the Word of God" (Sauvage and Campos, 1991, p. 80). In one of his letters to a Brother, he wrote that "writing is necessary, but religious studies are surely more in keeping with your profession...the first of your daily occupations, since your first care is to instill a Christian spirit into your students" (Loes, 1988, p. 214). La Salle considered it absolutely necessary for a Christian Brother to be competent in the Scriptures (particularly the New Testament), the truths of the Catholic religion and the catechism (Colhocker, 1991, p. 94).

Dom Elie Maillefer (1979, p. 108) related how the writings of La Salle were animated with the spirit of Christianity beginning with the first treatise on "*The duties of a Christian towards God, and the way to fulfill them*". The second book on practical methods for preparing well for Confession, and the dispositions with which we should receive the sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist concluded with prayers and aspirations from Sacred Scriptures. The third book on "*The Rules of Politeness and of Christian Courtesy*" provided examples taken from Sacred Scripture and from the fathers of the church.

The Founder's devotion to the Blessed Virgin which he also recommended to his Brothers and their students has scriptural foundation. Bro. Gregory Wright cites the Biblical events where Mary played a significant role which La Salle included in his Meditations: from the Incarnation, the sanctification of John, the visit of the Magi, the presentation of Jesus in the Temple, the hidden life in Egypt and Nazareth, the finding of Jesus in the Temple, the miracle at Cana and the death of Jesus on Calvary (p. 9).

In his correspondence (Loes, 1988), he exhorted his Brothers and other spiritual children to keep the spirit of the Gospel, such as obedience, faith, patience, humility. There are also many quotations from the Bible as in the following examples: "He who looks back is not worthy of him" (p. 132), "Happy are you who are poor" (p. 136). He advised a Brother: "But if you ought to speak to your Brothers with humility and gentleness, you ought to be no less careful to act in the same way toward people outside the community. St. Paul requires this of all Christians" (p. 153). He also admonished a young Brother to rid himself of needless anxiety: "While you are young, you should prepare yourself to accept them (anxieties and ailments) courageously and, as you have already been doing, make use of the maxims of the Gospel to welcome them and draw profit from them... (p. 217). He gave spiritual direction even to religious of other communities and his letters were also biblically inspired. To a member of a religious community of men, he wrote: "Whenever you see someone fall into some fault, call to mind what is said in the Gospel, "You can see the splinter in your brother's eye, but you cannot see the beam in your own..." (p. 219). He also challenged a member of a religious community of women to be faithful in responding to God's grace and reminded her of the message of the Holy Spirit in the mouth of the Prophet, "If today you hear his voice, take care not to harden your heart, for this could bring about his withdrawal from you, perhaps forever..." (p. 233).

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