

OUR PREPARATION FOR THE GREAT JUBILEE YEAR OF 2000

The process of identification with Christ in the writings of John Baptist de La Salle (1/4)

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Volume 3 of the *Lasallian Themes* series, which was published recently in French, includes a fairly long article (24 pages) by Brother Antonio Botana on the **Imitation of Christ**. This is a resume of Lasallian thinking whose appearance at this particular time is very fortunate, because it can help us to prepare for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. The English and Spanish versions of volume 3 are being worked on and will appear in the course of the year. Lasalliana is happy to be able to offer its readers some extracts from this remarkable article by Brother Antonio Botana.

The article begins by speaking of the **imitation and following of Christ in the life of John Baptist de La Salle**, and then it goes on to describe the process of identification with Christ as described in his writings. The next issue of *Lasalliana* will speak of some of the **specifically Lasallian ways of following Christ**.

Although references to this process can be found throughout his works, it cannot be said that De La Salle wrote a treatise on the process of identification with Christ. What we have, however, makes it easy to understand the process of interiorisation which De La Salle considered to be an essential characteristic of the following of Christ and the participation in his mystery. We shall now examine what De La Salle understood by christocentricity [See Sauvage - Campos, *Annoncer l'Évangile aux pauvres*, p.189-217].

1. "Disciple and imitator of Jesus Christ"

1. Conversion a condition

"We call Christians all those who belong to that religion. This name comes from Christ, and it signifies disciple and imitator of Jesus Christ" (CL 20 Preface = DA 0,0,5). The first step towards identification with Christ is to become his *disciple*, and by implication, his *imitator*. De La Salle, however, prefers to be more explicit: he uses both terms to define a Christian.

A disciple is recognised by the very fact of imitating Christ, because, if we consider him our Master, *we must try to conform our life to his and to what he has taught us in his Holy Gospel* (CL 22,191 = DC 42,13,11). It is not surprising,

therefore, that De La Salle insists so much on the need to imitate Christ, considering it as a constant activity in the life of a Christian. He offers various motives for this. Jesus Christ wished to be our model: "*If Jesus Christ has performed these divine mysteries*" it was "*not only to redeem us, but also to instruct us and to lead us by his example to the practice of the most solid and sanctifying virtues*" (CL 14,60 = EM 8,180).

As disciples, we must try to resemble him. De La Salle expresses this in the form of a prayer: "*Lord, make me live in such a way that there is some resemblance between my life and yours by imitating your holy virtues*" CL 14,66 = EM 8,193,8). This is an indispensable condition for sharing the glory that is Jesus Christ's and which he has promised us: "*I am convinced of this truth, that if I wish to share in your glory in heaven, I have to make myself conformable to you on earth*" (CL 14,81 = EM 9,225,4).

But the Christian educator, the Brother, has also another motive: he is the representative of Christ for his disciples: "*And since you are taking his place, consider yourself obliged to do the same thing*" (MR 196,1). There are a number of consequences that flow from this absolute necessity to imitate Jesus Christ and to learn from him. One of them, since we cannot imitate someone we do not know, is that we have to have recourse to the principal source of this knowledge, the New Testament. The Founder insists on the regular reading of especially the Gospels (cf. MR 196; MF 190,1).

2. A radical choice

What De La Salle is actually proposing, although in different terms, by his repeated invitation to read the Gospels in order to know Christ and imitate him, is to enter into a process of "evangelical radicality" or, in other words, to undertake a tireless search for the roots of Christian life, or make conversion to Christ a dimension of one's life. And this applies to everyone, whether he is a consecrated person, such as the Brother, or an ordinary Christian, such as his disciples, since all are Christians. De La Salle speaks often of this desire for radicality and of not being satisfied with the level one has reached: "*Attach yourself to what is of faith (in mental prayer) which leads [...] to the imitation of Jesus Christ and to the exercise of the virtues he practised, trying to imitate him as perfectly as possible*" (CL 15,129 = R 14,3,3). "Have you really left all from your innermost heart?" (MF 167,1). He says the same regarding the pupils: "*You must encourage them, as Jesus Christ teaches, not to be satisfied with doing good actions*" MR 202,2). "*That in all things they grow in Jesus Christ*" (MR 205,3).

3. A crucifying choice

The imitation of Jesus Christ is a human activity that is eminently ascetic: it calls for will power and constant effort: "*I am resolved to follow you, O my loving Saviour, whatever it may cost me*" (CL 14,64 = EM 8,192,5). Far from hiding the element of mortification involved in the following of Christ, he stresses its necessity, but this has nothing to do with the desire for perfection: it is a consequence of following Christ:

* Seeking God's glory: "*Being prepared [...] to sacrifice all honour, health and life for the glory and interests of God, imitating Jesus Christ, who said: «Whoever wishes to follow me, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me»*" (CL 15,155 = R 15,1,2 quoting Mt 16,24).

* For love of him: "*Suffer all trials of mind and body for the love of God and to imitate Jesus Christ*" (CL 15,180 = R 15,11,1).

* Because "devotion to Our Lord Jesus Christ [consists in] imitating the virtues which he practised" (CL 22,188 = DC 42,13,4).

* So that we can enjoy his glory: "Imitate the crucified life of Our Lord Jesus Christ so that our body and our soul can enjoy the glory prepared for them in heaven" (CL 22,176 = DC 42,10,6).

4. A personalising choice

De La Salle does not consider the imitation of Christ as an end in itself, nor as something mechanical or an exercise in willpower directed at a model who remains outside of ourselves. On the contrary, he insists on its personalising character and that we are following someone and not something. This is so much so that we can rely on the model to help us to imitate him. This help is interior, in the form of grace, since it is the model himself who inspires and helps us to imitate him.

We have already seen that De La Salle is reluctant to use the term "model" in reference to Christ, because perhaps he wishes to avoid the passive connotation of the word. He prefers to speak of the "example" of Christ, stressing in this way the positive character of the invitation of the "Master" and "Saviour" who goes before us so that we can follow him: "Jesus Christ has taught us the practice of the virtues by his example and by his words as things necessary for salvation. That is why he says he is the Way" (CL 14,94 = EM 11,249).

Aware of the dependence we have on the Master, De La Salle invites us to ask for the grace of imitation so that we can follow Christ better: "Give me the grace that you have earned for me [...] to imitate you [...] the grace to follow you and walk in your footsteps" (CL 14,64 = EM 8,192,7).

5. For apostolic motives

Where imitation can be seen most clearly as a manifestation of following of Jesus Christ is in the context of its primary purpose, the mission. We are called to imitate Christ in order to participate in the mission entrusted to him by his Father. It should be noted that De La Salle does not attribute this purpose only to the Brothers, but to all Christians, saying in his catechism that among "the virtues that we must particularly imitate in Jesus Christ" there is "the zeal that he always showed for the salvation of souls" (CL 22,192 = DC 42,13,12).

We must accomplish the saving mission in which we are participating in the same way as Jesus Christ, that is, by being faithful to the will of the Father. For this purpose, we must renounce our own will "because Jesus Christ renounced his own will at the moment of his conception, even though it was very holy and incapable of disorder. For this reason he said: «I have not come to do my will»" (CL 15,114 = R 13,13,1 quoting Jn 6,38).

The invitation to follow Christ is even more pressing in the case of the Brother teachers: "Attach yourself to Jesus Christ alone; occupy yourself with his doctrine and with the holy truths he has taught us, since he has chosen you in preference to many others to announce these truths to your pupils, who are his beloved ones" (MF 167,2).

Imitation motivated by the ministry applies to all aspects of the mission, and that is why the Brothers - Christian edu-

cators - must, like the Apostles "model their conduct in everything on Jesus Christ and be with him at all the conversions he brought about. [...] This is also what you must do, since Jesus Christ has chosen you among so many others to be his cooperators in the salvation of souls. You must study in the Gospel how Jesus led his disciples to practise the truths of the Gospel" (MR 196,2).

The text we have quoted, and the whole of MF 196, helps us to further our understanding of the imitation of Jesus Christ in the context of following and identifying with Christ: we imitate the person who chose us and made us his cooperators. By imitating him we do not simply evoke a memory: we continue his action, we bring him into the present where he continues to save people, so much so that he "wants your disciples to look upon you as they look upon him" (MR 195,2). He alone can give life to what we do: "All your care for the children entrusted to you would be useless if Jesus Christ himself did not give the power, the quality and the energy that is needed to render your care useful" (MR 195,3).

And so, we see that imitation is directed not at the external actions of Christ but at his attitudes and internal dispositions. De La Salle invites us to make them our own so as "to begin, continue and do all our actions in union with Our Lord" (R 126).

The imitation of Christ ensures that prayer is authentic and, at the same time, is a fruit of that prayer. This is yet another point De La Salle insists on: he wants there to be a clear link between prayer and life, between prayer and the ministry of the Brother. It is significant that he says: "Do not look for feelings in prayer", but value whatever leads to the "imitation of Christ and the exercise of the virtues he practised" (R 129). In his catechism, he tells us that devotion to Christ consists essentially in the imitation of his virtues (DC 187-188); and in EM, that the fruit that the consideration of some of his mysteries "must produce in us is a great desire to imitate him in all the virtues that he exemplifies" (CL 14,68 = EM 8,195). And when we are praying about a particular mystery, and have assimilated fully its spirit, "it is necessary to join to this reverence for the mystery the interior desire to benefit from it and to receive the spirit, the grace and the fruit that Our Lord wants us to derive from it" (CL 14,60 = EM 7,179).

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(1) It is often difficult to grasp what De La Salle meant exactly by such expressions as spirit of Jesus Christ, spirit of Christianity, spirit of faith, spirit of God, Holy Spirit. We invite the reader to consult a study by Varela in *Biblia y Espiritualidad*, p. 182-190. Also recommended is the article by the same author on Spirit of Christianity in *Lasallian Themes I*.

As far as we are concerned, and to avoid confusion in the use of these expressions, we shall restrict ourselves to a number of texts in which one can presume that the references are to the Holy Spirit, the divine person, or in which one can identify him as the one who infuses us with the life of Christ. Cf. Campos and Sauvage, *Encountering God in the Depths of the Mind and Heart*, p. 46-54 and p. 416-418; Maymi, *Vida de fe*, p. 82-89.