

OUR PREPARATION FOR THE GREAT JUBILEE YEAR OF 2000

The process of identification with Christ in the writings of John Baptist de La Salle (2/4)

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2. In conformity with his views and motives

1. Inspiration which motivates

In the introduction to the *Rules of Propriety and Christian Politeness*, De La Salle speaks of the need for the motivation of all human conduct, including social courtesy, to be inspired by Jesus Christ. He bases himself on the words of St Paul: "never say or do anything except in the name of the Lord Jesus" (CL 19,ii = RB 0,0,3 quoting Ph 4,8).

De La Salle adds that it is for this reason that, when parents educate their children, they should give them motives such as "the glory of God and salvation", "through respect for the presence of God" or because their neighbours are "living members of Jesus Christ and living temples animated by the Holy Spirit". These "views" and "motives", in addition to "sanctifying all their actions", enable them to distinguish correctly between "Christian politeness and affability and what is worldly and almost pagan". Inspired by Christian sentiments "they will be able to live as true Christians, their external behaviour conformable to that of Jesus Christ and to that of their profession" (CL 19,iii = RB 0,0,5f).

He says the same to the teachers: "In carrying out your service to children, you will not fulfil your ministry adequately if you conform only to the external actions of Jesus Christ. [...] You must also adopt his views and motives as your own" (MR 196,3).

This desire to become truly interior and to conform to the views of Jesus Christ is expressed even more strongly in EM, where it is sought as a grace from God. Many of the "acts" of the Method express this desire. The act of union with Our Lord (meditating on the virtue of humility) reads as follows: "May the unction of your holy grace teach me to be humble of heart and to practise humility, not only exteriorly, as do people of the world out of shrewdness, but with a view of faith, in union with your Spirit, in conformity with your dispositions, and in imitation of you" (CL 14,105 = EM 14,285b).

2. Imitating Christ in his virtues

There is an even deeper level than interior conformity to Jesus Christ shown by external conduct: participation in the spirit of the mysteries (CL 14,59f = EM 7,178f). The following of Christ can be seen as a constant movement from the spirit of the mysteries to attitudes which result from it to ex-

ternal acts and back to the spirit that should inspire them (cf. RB, introduction).

In the *Duties of a Christian*, the consideration of the various mysteries of Jesus Christ leads to the imitation of the virtues exemplified in them. And so, "to honour the mystery of the Passion of Our lord Jesus Christ", we must "imitate the humility, obedience, patience, charity and gentleness that Our Lord revealed during his passion" (CL 22,169 = DC 42,8,14). In EM, mental prayer on a virtue of Jesus Christ makes us enter into the spirit that inspired him and unites us to him. This spirit puts us in contact with the unique mystery of salvation which Jesus Christ accomplishes throughout history [See Sauvage-Campos, *Encountering God...* p.417]. Once we have assimilated the spirit of the mystery, the normal development of our mental prayer should lead us to choose a practical application.

3. Even in his death and resurrection

In De La Salle's writings, interior conformity with Christ always leads to the paschal mystery. In this phase of interior conformity, De La Salle lays special stress on Christ suffering on the cross, and it is clear that it is in this that we can be most like him: "We are Christian only insofar as we resemble our divine Saviour, and it is the love of suffering and mortification that renders us like him" (MF 176,3).

Moreover, according to the meditation for the Transfiguration, conformity to the suffering Christ is necessary if the Father is to recognise us as having entered into the mystery of Jesus, his "well-beloved Son". When a soul "is thus transfigured with Jesus it must take pleasure in speaking of his passion and cross. In this way, it will show that its whole desire is to conform with him in his state of suffering, for the Eternal Father will recognise it as his well-beloved only insofar as it has a love of suffering" (MF 152,3).

The attitudes or "virtues" which are most difficult from a human point of view reveal their true meaning when considered in the light of the spirit of the mystery of the cross revealed in Jesus. This is the case of obedience to which De La Salle devotes considerable space. For him, to obey means to conform ourselves to Jesus Christ, and to make part of ourselves the love Christ had for his Father, the same love which made him sacrifice himself to make up for our sins (cf. CL 15,169 = R 15,6,3).

In De La Salle's writings, there are abundant references to mortification, penance and participation in the sufferings of Christ. His point of view, which appears pessimistic, becomes understandable when seen in the light of the process of which it is part, namely, the transformation of the "old man" into the "new man". It is a process of purification, of death in order to have new life. This is not masochism, but the search for the new life offered by the Risen Christ, the same Christ who died on the cross.

It is a process which encourages the renunciation of sin in order "to live for holiness" (MD 28,2). The motive is Jesus Christ, and not our own sanctification. "We who have been born in sin and have lived in a sinful state, should conform ourselves to Jesus Christ in this life and suffer with him if we wish to have him as our Head and to be his members. We should also destroy sin in ourselves" (MF 152,1).

In this process, suffering is positive in character; it is a condition of life, a means of uniting ourselves with the redeeming mystery of Christ. "All that remains now, as St Paul says, is «to pay off the debt which the afflictions of Christ leave still to be paid», which is the application that must be made of his merits to ourselves through our participation in his sufferings" (MD 25,3).

The stress in this process is not so much on the personal desire for advancement, however essential, but on the contemplation of Jesus in his state of humiliation (cf. MF 112,2), the grace that he has earned for us. In the meditation for Holy Saturday, "*On the Five Wounds of Jesus Christ*", De La Salle invites us to "*place your hand [...] in the wound of the side [...] to penetrate, if possible, right to the heart of Jesus, in order to draw from it into yours sentiments of Christian patience, entire resignation and perfect conformity to the will of God*" (MD 28,3).

We can say that the process leads us to conformity with the Saviour. The most representative image of the Saviour in all Christian spirituality is that of the crucified Christ. In order that God can send us as *saviours*, in order that the poor can recognise us as such (cf. MF 86,3), we must become conformable to the crucified Christ: "*we should make our whole glory consist in bearing the scars of the Lord Jesus printed on our body. [...] We shall never better appear his servants, friends and imitators, than by imprinting his holy cross on ourselves, and by suffering like him*" (MF 165,3).

The background to this whole process, and not just its final phase, is illuminated by the resurrection of Christ which, as De La Salle says, "*is both glorious for him and advantageous for the faithful [...] because it is an assurance that we too shall rise again [...] because by his resurrection he conquered death*" (MD 29,1). If Jesus Christ rose from the dead, it was "that we too might live".

However, what is required of us now is painful: "*Crucify this body with all its passions and its impulses on the cross of Jesus Christ*". This pain is alleviated by Christ's promise

to make us like himself in his resurrection. He can make our bodies participate even now "*in the incorruptibility of Jesus Christ by being preserved from sin*" (MD 29,2).

And so, in De La Salle's eyes, this process of "kenosis" in order to conform to Christ is a process of resurrection, full of hope and joy: "*The resurrection of Christ should procure you also the advantage of rising from the dead spiritually, by making you live [...] an entirely new life. [...] Mortify your earthly bodies [...] and divest yourself of the old man and put on the new*" (MD 29,3).

4. In everyday life, a ministry which involves dying to self

The process of conforming ourselves to Christ, which we have just considered, runs the risk of being seen in terms of an abstract understanding of the Gospel, a sort of anachronistic transposition of the passion of Christ, if we separate it from the context in which De La Salle placed it, namely, the ministry of the Brother.

It is in his ministry and by it that the Brother achieves interior conformity with Christ. The difficulties he experiences in his ministry help him to die to himself (MF 145,3), and thanks to the example and love of Christ he will overcome them: "*Yet in all this we are conquerors, through him who has granted us his love, and who delivered himself up for our sake*" (MF 152,1).

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