

## OUR PREPARATION FOR THE GREAT JUBILEE YEAR OF 2000

### The process of identification with Christ in the writings of John Baptist de La Salle (3/4)

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### 3. Living the mystery of Christ

#### 1. A spiritual reality

In De La Salle's spiritual teaching, the imitation of Christ and identification with him lead us to a new aspect of following Christ: the living experience of the mystery of Christ. We can see here an echo of the words of St Paul, which were so dear to the French school of spirituality: "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Ga 2,20). According to De La Salle, these words sum up perfectly the ideal which ought to guide our Christian life and our educational ministry.

When we first begin to follow Christ, and seem to be fully involved in the ascetic process of conversion, union with Christ is presented as an ideal for all Christians and not only for religious. In a book written for the pupils, his "Instructions and Prayers for Holy Mass, confession and communion", De La Salle has the following to say: "Change, then, Divine Jesus, this natural life of mine which seeks only its own comfort [...] so that living only with the life you have given me, I can truly say that I no longer live my own life, but that you live in me" (CL 17,272 = I 6,24,2).

In EM, De La Salle puts this union with Christ on a much higher level and, following St John, compares it to the union of Christ with his Father: "You were in your Father and your Father was in you. [...] Make me dwell in you and may you dwell in me" CL 14,56 = EM 6,169,a and f).

#### 2. In the ministry

When this mystical experience of Christian life is applied to the educational ministry of children there is no qualitative shift. When De La Salle uses terms such as "ministers of Jesus Christ" or "ambassadors and representatives of Jesus Christ" and applies them to the Brothers and, by extension, to Christian educators, he is speaking of the same reality which enables him to see the Brothers as "sacraments" for poor and abandoned children, who will be loved, served, taught and saved by Christ in the person of the Brother: "He wants your disciples to see him in you" (MR 195,2).

#### 3. In prayer

However, this "sacramentality" of the Brother is not automatic. On the one hand, it depends on the interior union the

Brother has with Christ and which he can acquire through mental prayer: "You must, therefore, apply yourself assiduously to prayer in order to succeed in your ministry. [...] Jesus Christ, seeing that you regard him in your employment as the one who can do everything and yourself as an instrument that ought to be moved only by him, will not fail to grant you what you ask of him" (MR 196,1).

On the other hand, this sacramentality requires the Brother to identify himself with the purpose Christ has given his mission, and to have in his work "intentions as pure as those of Jesus Christ" (MR 196,3). Drawing a clear parallel between the Brothers and Christ, De La Salle tells them that, as ministers of Jesus Christ, their sole aim must be "love and the glory of God" and "to procure the salvation of souls" (MR 201,2,3). Like the Son of God who came into this world, the Brother's aim must be to "destroy sin" (MR 202,1) and to communicate life to his pupils, so that he can say "what Jesus Christ said about the sheep whose shepherd he is: [...] «I have come that they may have life and may have it more abundantly»" (MR 201,3 quoting Jn 10,10).

#### 4. As part of the Church

The mystery of Christ is also the mystery of the Church, his Mystical Body. Sharing in the mystery of Christ leads invariably to sharing in the mystery of the Church. The ministry of the Brother comes simultaneously from "Jesus Christ and his Church" (MR 201,2). This is yet another motive "to have much zeal in your vocation". "You must also show the Church what love you have for her and give her proof of your zeal, since it is for the Church, the body of Christ, that you work" (MR 201,2).

In the spiritual teachings of De La Salle, the following of Christ has a strong ecclesial character which is reflected in the Brother's ministry. The Brother, as a sacrament of Christ in the Church, should act in such a way that his zeal gives "tangible proof that [he] loves those whom God has entrusted to him, just as Jesus Christ has loved his Church" (MR 201,2).

Sharing the zeal of the Church "for the sanctification of her children", the Brother helps "them to become truly part of the structure of this building" which is the Church (MR 201,2), "to build up with them the body of Jesus Christ and to make them holy and perfect" (MR 198,3).

De La Salle attaches great importance to this ecclesial dimension of the Brother's ministry, because, as he says, the Brother will have to render an account of his actions "as minister of God and dispenser of his mysteries for children" [...] "before the tribunal of Christ" at the Last Judgment (MR 205,1).

De La Salle affirms the Brother's responsibility to build up the Church: "When Jesus Christ made you responsible for the instruction of children and their formation in piety, he entrusted you with the task of building up his body which is the Church, and as far as possible, of making her holy and purifying her by the word of life" (MR 205,3). The motive put forward by De La Salle reflects the identification of the mystery of Christ with that of the Church: "This is why he wants you to give him a faithful account when he calls for it, for he has this responsibility very much at heart, having loved his Church so much that he gave himself up for it" (MR 205,3).

Finally he applies the mystery to the children from a christological and an ecclesiological point of view. It is the responsibility of the Brother to introduce the children to this mystery. This is, in fact, the purpose of Christian initiation: "Jesus Christ desires also that you accomplish your task of making them holy so well that they reach the age of the perfect man and the fulness of Christ. [...] and grow to the full maturity of Christ, who is their head, and through whom the

whole body of the Church holds its structure and its union, so that they may be always so united with it and in it that [...] they will share in the promises of God in Jesus Christ" (MR 205,3).

St John's image of the vine and branches is used by De La Salle to express our union with Christ. We should note the ecclesial context in which he uses this Gospel allegory in EM. De La Salle comments on the "second manner of placing ourselves in the holy presence of God in the place where we are by considering Our Lord present in the midst of those who are gathered together in his name" (CL 14,9 = EM 2,24). In this community context, he refers to the fruit that this way of being present can produce, and he stresses the mystical power of prayer in life: "a continuous movement of our actions to Christ and of Christ's to us" [See *Encountering God...* p.51-60]. "That all of our actions may be related to Jesus Christ and tend towards him as to their centre and draw all of their power from him, as the branches of the vine draw their sap from the vine" (CL 14,10f = EM 2,31f).

Staying with the image of the vine, the second fruit introduces us into the mystery of communion between Jesus Christ and ourselves, the source of any fruit we produce: "Jesus Christ does everything in us because he lives in us and we live in him, and that has the result, he says, that we bear fruit in plenty" (CL 14,10f = EM 2,35f).

In MR, De La Salle applies explicitly to the ministry of the Brother what was implicit in EM: the effectiveness of his work with children will depend on "the virtue, the power and the efficacy that Jesus Christ gives him, since all your care for the children entrusted to you will be true and effective to the extent that Jesus Christ blesses it and you remain united with him. Like the branch of the vine..." (MR 195,3).

## 5. A sacrificial process

Participation in the mystery of Christ reaches its highest point when we unite ourselves to his consecration to his Father. Following a tendency of the French school of spirituality, itself based on St Paul's letter to the Hebrews, De La Salle returns often to the sacrificial aspect of Christ's redemption and the effect it should have on our lives. Basing himself on two scriptural texts (Ph 2,5f and Hb 9,15), De La Salle outlines the different phases of the sacrifice of Christ "who humiliated himself, taking the form of a servant, submitting himself to his creatures and being obedient to them until death on the cross; and who offering himself as a victim without stain, was exalted in glory and has become the mediator of the New Testament" [See *Encountering God...* p.414-416]. We should note the positive character of the descending-ascending movement.

De La Salle indicates what response this requires from Christians and from the Brothers, because of their ministry. The basic disposition they should have can be found in the Eucharist: "Enter into the spirit of the sacrifice in which [Jesus] always lived, in which he died, and in which he wishes to remain till the end of time" (CL 22,192 = DC 42,13,13). He invites them to unite themselves with Christ in the Mass: "If Jesus Christ gives his divine life for us, we cannot do less

than offer him our earthly and creaturely lives. This is the sacrifice we must offer if we wish to participate in that of Jesus Christ" (CL 15,220 = R 16,8,3). After the consecration, he suggests we intensify our efforts to be united to Christ and his dispositions as "the victim of adoration of his father, and as his mediator and reconciler with men" (CL 15,140 = R 14,6,8).

## 6. Conclusions

De La Salle asks the Brothers how their conduct reflects these dispositions in everyday life: "You offered yourself to God when you left the world. Can it be said you kept nothing back? [...] You ought not to rest content with having once given yourself to God. You should renew this donation every day and consecrate all your actions to God by doing them all for his sake" (MF 104,2).

In the meditation for the Vigil of the Ascension, De La Salle, basing himself on Jn 17, compares Christ's consecration to the Father with that of the Brother: Jesus consecrates himself for his disciples so that they can be sanctified in truth and can "contribute to the sanctification of others. It is for this reason he offers himself to his Father, and wishes to sacrifice himself by his death on the cross". In the same way, the Brother must sacrifice himself for his pupils: "Since you are expected to bring about the sanctification of your pupils, you ought yourself to possess holiness to an uncommon degree" (MD 39,2).

The union of our actions with those of Christ is what makes them holy and agreeable to God since they are thus included in the offering Christ made of himself to his Father. It is a gift and at the same time a requirement for everybody. De La Salle reminds the Brothers of this regarding their work with children: "Since you are obliged to help your disciples to save themselves, you must lead them to unite all their actions to those of Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Their actions are made holy by his merits and consecration, becoming through him pleasing to God and a means of their salvation" (MR 195,1).

Christ's offering of himself to the Father leads to the sacrifice of his own life. The Brother, as a "sacrament" of Christ in his ministry, must be aware of the consequences of his own consecration: "It must have been the ardent zeal you had to save the souls of those you had to instruct that led you to sacrifice yourself and spend your whole life giving them a Christian education and procuring for them a life of grace in this world and eternal life in the next" (MR 201,3).

And so, like the shepherd willing to give his life for his sheep, the Brother achieves union with Christ by exercising his ministry with one last disposition: by "acting with love, with a true and sincere zeal, accepting with much patience the difficulties [he] has to suffer, willing to be dishonoured by men and mistreated even to give [his] life for Jesus in the fulfilment of [his] ministry" (MR 201,1; cf. MR 198,2; MF 135,2; 137,3).

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