

## OUR PREPARATION FOR THE GREAT JUBILEE YEAR OF 2000

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

Brother Antonio Botana

### 4. Identification with Christ in the Spirit

The further we enter into the mystery of Christ, the stronger the interior force that draws us towards union with Christ. De La Salle draws our attention to this force which is none other than the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit [1]. His role in the following of Christ is so important, that De La Salle makes its successful outcome dependent on him, both for the Brothers and their pupils. However, the exercise of this power is restricted by our human freedom, our own desire to be converted to Christ and our openness to the Spirit's action.

De La Salle has much to say about the role of the Holy Spirit in the Brother's ministry and in Christian life in general. We shall restrict our own commentary, however, to the topic which concerns us specifically, and concentrate on aspects related to the process of identification with Christ.

#### 1. The Spirit, a gratuitous gift

Whoever sets off to follow in the footsteps of Christ receives the Spirit of Jesus as a gift. The longer he pursues this process, the greater this gift becomes. When De La Salle speaks of the Holy Spirit as a gift of the Father given by the Son to the Church, he reflects the Christian tradition at its most pure (Jn 14,16; 20,22). De La Salle assures those who have left all to follow Christ that they will receive a hundred-fold through the gift of the Spirit: *"It is impossible to conceive how much Jesus loves those who have left all for his sake, and how he showers graces upon them both for themselves and for others. As their heart is empty of the things of this world, God fills it with his Holy Spirit"* (MF 167,2).

By his constant reference to the role of the Holy Spirit in the development of spiritual life, De La Salle affirms the absolute primacy of God's initiative in the generation of the New Man. De La Salle often expresses this profound conviction, based on his personal experience, in the form of a prayer which he invites the Brothers to use: *"Often repeat with the Church these holy words: «Send your Holy Spirit to give us a new life, and you will renew the face of the earth»"* (MD 42,3).

The gift of the Spirit is the first consequence of the presence of Jesus Christ in the midst of the Brothers: *"He is in the midst of them in order to give them his Holy Spirit and to di-*

*rect them by him in all of their actions and in all of their conduct"* (CL 14,9 = EM 2,26). This gift is also closely linked with the Eucharist and is its most immediate effect: *"It is in order to give them his Spirit that he gives them his body in this most august sacrament"* (MD 26,1). De La Salle returns to this topic in all the meditations for the octave of the feast of Corpus Christi: *"Thus when we receive the body of Christ, we participate in Our Saviour's life [...] if we preserve the Spirit of Christ, which is what he leaves in us"* (MD 48,3).

#### 2. Fundamental role of the present in the mystery of Christ

The history of salvation, which is centred on the events of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, is continued and made present by the action of the Holy Spirit. In the EM, De La Salle mentions frequently the need to enter into the spirit of the mysteries of Jesus Christ. What this expression means is that the saving grace attached to the historical actions of Jesus transcends those actions and reaches our lives today. Presiding over this process there is the divine Spirit who alone is capable of making us conform interiorly with the attitudes of Jesus, and of making his saving action present in us. Sometimes, De La Salle makes a clearer reference to the Holy Spirit, as when he says: *"It is therefore most appropriate for us to unite ourselves with Jesus' birth, to come into contact with his Spirit and share in it: which gives us access to the Father as adopted children in his only Son"* (CL 14,84 = EM 10,231 quoting Ga 4,5-6).

The intervention of the Spirit in our history makes life "according to Christ" possible, and this life is none other than the life of the Spirit. In his writings, at times, De La Salle moves from one aspect of this same reality to the other, to show that they are identical and to stress that the Spirit now has the leading role in the process of identification with Christ. For example in EM, basing himself on Ga 2,20, he moves from the life of Christ to the life of the Spirit: *"Come, therefore, Holy Spirit, take possession of my heart, and animate all my actions to such an extent that it may be said that you produce them more than I, [...] Happy those who live and act only by the Spirit of God. It is of them we may say that they no longer live, but that it is Jesus Christ, or rather the Holy spirit, who lives in them"* (CL 14,18f = EM 2,62c-d). In MD 48,1, the movement is in the opposite direction: this time the emphasis is on the presence of Jesus Christ in our soul through the action of the Spirit: *"Do you allow him full liberty to communicate his Holy Spirit to your soul? Is he so alive in you that you are able to say that it is no longer you who live, but that «it is Christ that lives in you»?"* (MD 48,1).

#### 3. Effort and the acceptance of the Spirit

De La Salle is surprisingly successful in maintaining a balance between the role of human liberty and that of divine initiative in the process of the following of Christ. We know that De La Salle strongly encouraged ascetic effort, self-control and the desire of conversion, but at the same time, and even more strongly, if possible, he stressed the importance of being open to the action of God and to the acceptance of the gift of the Spirit, who is the moving force behind our journey to God and especially our apostolic activity. He is careful to avoid both voluntarism and quietism.

The meditation for Pentecost Tuesday shows these two opposite poles quite clearly.

1. There is the call to make an effort of the will: *"It is impossible to preserve the life of grace unless we mortify the inclinations of our corrupt nature: this is what St Paul calls the flesh. Hence, the greater resistance you offer the more you will be strengthened in the life of grace. This is the only way in which you may belong entirely to Jesus Christ"*.

2. However, despite this being "the only way", there is no doubt as to whose initiative it really is, and who the moving force is: "You must act (in your state) through grace and show that you are moved by the impulse of the Spirit of God. This is the mark, according to St Paul, that you are in the grace of God. As he says, if you live by the Spirit, act also by the spirit" (MD 42,2).

Elsewhere, the relationship between the two poles is expressed by the opposition of life and death: "It is this Holy Spirit who animates our actions, and who is in them a spirit of life and who acts in such a way that they are not dead actions in us" (CL 14,11 = EM 2,36).

However, even given this balance, human nature is very fragile, and De La Salle does not hesitate to insist on the absolute priority of the divine initiative. In a prayer before communion written for use by the pupils, he prays to Christ to give them his supreme Gift to animate all their actions: "Come and take possession of my heart again and leave your Holy Spirit there as a token of your love, so that he can regulate all its movements, moderate all my passions, and leave in me only an inclination to do good" (CL 17 = I 6,13,2).

Our identification with Christ is accomplished by the movement of the Spirit. This is equally true in the case of the pupils who also have to achieve identification with Christ, a process which depends on the efficacy of our ministry. Only the movement of the Spirit, if we have accepted him as a gift,

will enable us to represent Jesus Christ. He alone will produce the required fruits in the pupils: "Frequently give yourself to the Spirit of Our Lord, to act only under his influence and not through any self-seeking. This Holy Spirit, then, will fill your students with himself, and they will be able to possess fully the Christian spirit" (MR 195,2).

By a process of cause and effect, De La Salle makes the success of the ministry to the pupils depend on the action of the Spirit in the person of the minister, whose words become then "spirit and life for them [...] because they will be produced by the Spirit of God living in you. In this way, there will be communicated to them the spirit of Christianity [...] which is the Spirit of Jesus Christ himself" (MR 196,3).

However, it is not only the sacramentality of the minister which counts in this transmission of the Spirit. **The sacramentality of the poor person** is also a channel for the action of the Spirit: "Like St Francis, look upon them as the image of Jesus Christ, and as being the best disposed to receive his Spirit abundantly". From this "ministerial situation", he draws a conclusion regarding the identification of the Brother with Christ: "In this way, the more you cherish them, the more you will belong to Jesus Christ" (MF 173,1).

It can be seen, therefore, that the apostolic ministry is the place, par excellence, where identification with Christ takes place, under the action of the Spirit, both for the teacher and for the pupil. •