

**THE MOST BLESSED VIRGIN
IN THE DUTIES OF A CHRISTIAN,
FIRST PART
(1/2)**

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INTRODUCTION

The following lines do not in any way pretend to capture the rich and vast doctrine and even less the filial affection that Saint John Baptist de La Salle had for the Most Blessed Virgin. Its purpose is none other than to point out how and in which areas in the "Duties of a Christian" did the Catechist of Rheims write about the Virgin Mary in one of his most significant theological works.

The presence of the Virgin Mary in the First Part of the "Duties of a Christian", hereafter referred to as DC1, is similar to her presence in the Gospels. She appears in allusive moderation but with the capital relevance that she plays in the Mystery of Salvation, realized by her Son Jesus Christ.

IN THE MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

In its first appearance in DC1 the name of Mary is associated with that of the *Mother of God* (1). This is the origin and fundamental belief of the singularity and preeminence that for the author of DC1 the Virgin Mary has above all "pure creatures; therefore he always refers to her as the *Most Blessed Virgin* in contrast to the sources in which the DC was based - these always used the adjective *blessed*.

All of De La Salle's doctrine regarding the Most Blessed Virgin, in her various dimensions is based on and seen in the light of her Divine Motherhood. Everything is based on this concept, her fullness of grace, her exemption from original sin, her Assumption into Heaven both in body and soul..., in a word, her prominence for being above "all pure creatures".

He states precisely and with theological rigor the mystery of the divine Motherhood of Mary: "The Most Blessed Virgin is really and truly the Mother of Jesus Christ, because she conceived him and bore him. She is also truly the Mother of God, not because she has engendered his Divinity, but because she engendered the body of Jesus Christ, who is united to the Person of the son of God and who is God. She is effectively the Mother of He who is both God and Man" (2). All of De La Salle's Marian theology is based on the divine Motherhood. All of Mary's titles are justified in her singular title as the Mother of God.

De La Salle, basing himself in the Gospels, points out the role of the Most Blessed Virgin at various times in the life of her son: "Eight days after his birth he was circumcised and that same day the Most Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph gave him the name of Jesus" (3). "Forty days after his birth the Most Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph took him to the temple in Jerusalem in order to present him to God" (4). "At the same time, the Most Blessed Virgin fulfilled the law of Purification" (5). Note the importance that De La Salle attributes to Mary over St. Joseph since, according to the law, it was the father who named the child. "Some time later, St. Joseph was advised by an angel to flee to Egypt with Jesus and the Most Blessed Virgin his mother" (6). The preceding passages only show the circumstances in which Mary as the mother of Jesus was involved, without taking into account her attitudes.

Beginning with that moment until Jesus Christ's resurrection, the following pages of DC1 cover the person of the Most Blessed Virgin as if with a respectful and silent veil and they meditate on her, in the line of the Gospel as she "meditated in her heart the mysteries of her beloved Son" (7).

The new presence of Mary in the text of DC1 coincides with the apparitions of Jesus after his resurrection. Here the author of DC1 goes beyond the Gospel text and resorts to mother-son relationships. Could it be possible that the most beloved Son would not have his first meeting as a raised person with her who, like no one else, shared his passion? Here is how DC1 answers that question: "Jesus Christ, after his Resurrection, was on earth for 40 days during which time he appeared to the Most Blessed Virgin, the Apostles and the Disciples" (8). His mother was mentioned first!

Up until now, DC1 presents those persons closely associated with the Mother and the Son; from now on references to the mother correspond to theological places whose importance over and above the angels and saints was pointed out: an importance, we emphasize again, which comes from being *the mother of God and co-redemptrix*.

IN THE AREA OF LOVE

Adoration that mankind should pay to God has to translate into veneration, respect for the Angels and Saints, but, above all, for the Most Blessed Virgin "who merits the most exalted honor that can be paid to any creature because she is the Mother of God" (9). This honor and veneration that we owe to the Most Blessed Virgin and to the Saints should manifest itself "in our prayer, gratitude and imitation" (10), which are characteristics proper to devotion.

Concerning the first Commandment, the DC1 points out the devotion that is due to the images of the Most Blessed Virgin and the Saints, clarifying that it is to their persons and not to the images themselves that honor is paid (11).

Within the confines of the second Commandment, it seems appropriate that the author of the DC1 clarifies the idea of vows: "A vow is a promise made to God concerning something good...one can only make vows to God...When someo-

ne says that he is making vows to the Most Blessed Virgin, it should be understood that one does this to God in order to honor the Most Blessed Virgin”...(12).

In other places in this spiritual work, De La Salle also recommends devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin as an effective way to combat temptations against the virtue of purity: “Those who wish to rid themselves of this shameful sin...must have a special devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin and pray daily with that intention in mind” (13). He points out a similar recommendation to fight against lust (14). We should note in passing that De La Salle, when he refers to devotion of the Most Blessed Virgin, always nuances it with weighty adjectives: *particular, great, tender, authentic, special...*

When the DC1 justifies the second Commandment of the Church in terms of why the feasts in honor of the Most Blessed Virgin were established, three reasons are given:

1. To give her special honor: we recall her most especially as a unique creature: Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son and Spouse of the Holy Spirit.
2. To thank God for graces received: “The Almighty has done great things for me”.
3. To obtain abundant graces from God through her mediation (15).

De La Salle shares the opinion that the Church should establish abstinence on Saturdays because, among other reasons “so that we might give witness to our devotion towards the Most Blessed Virgin” (16).

A proof of the importance that the DC1 gives to the effective intercession of Mary in the process of the salvation of mankind is when, on referring to those who are excommunicated, it says: “They remain without the help of the Most Blessed Virgin” (17). This of course is in reference to the role of Mary as mediator.

IN TERMS OF THE SOURCE OF GRACE

The penitent in confession should confess his sins also to the Most Blessed Virgin “because sin offends her Son whose death and injuries are renewed by faults and offenses committed” (18).

The marriage of the Most Blessed Virgin to St. Joseph should constitute the model for all Christian couples. De La Salle, in his treatment of the Sacrament of Matrimony, points out two cases that might be controversial for those who do not judge them in the light of faith. Explaining the passage from Genesis that “the two become one flesh” he distinguishes between two classes of union: corporal union and spiritual union or the union of hearts, which the former is not, except by being an exterior sign. And he ends this section by saying: “Marriage without the corporal union of the couple is still authentic just as it was in the case of St. Joseph and the Most Blessed Virgin” (19).

In another passage, he relies on the authority of St. Augustine who, in his own time, based himself on the marriage of St. Joseph and the Most Blessed Virgin when he maintained that it was a true marriage when the couple agreed to refrain from sexual relations and not have children for reasons of greater reciprocal and spiritual affection (20).

IN THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN GOD AND HUMANS

The second section of the second part of DC1 is, in our opinion, the author’s most original and most personal. It constitutes the place of encounter for many of De La Salle’s writings: Explanation of the Method of making Mental Prayer, Meditations, the Conduct of Schools, Instructions on how to make a good confession, etc. There are few contemporary French catechisms that devote so much time and depth to Prayer as does DC1.

In this study there is a radical departure from the sources which up until this time were the sources for inspiration (21), and a new inspiration and style has begun. The spirituality of the Founder who recommended prayer for his followers as the first and principal of the daily exercises, unifies and gives life to these ninety pages.

In contrast with the current practice of his time, De La Salle, in this treatise, does not speak of *devotions* - a term which never appears in any of his writings; on the other hand the *only devotion* that he recommends to his readers is to the Most Blessed Virgin which he justifies and bases on the fact that she is the Mother of God and the highest and most singular of all creatures. To illustrate and strengthen this Marian devotion he explains, in a section for each in DC1 (22) the two principal prayers in honor of the Most Blessed Virgin: *the Hail Mary and the Marian Office*.

Before we study each of these separately, let us point out some common characteristics:

1. Both were penned by De La Salle. It is rare that any page of DC1 was not inspired by some outside source. There were eight instances where the originality was exclusively that of the author.
2. The methodology is the same for both: they reveal a practiced pedagogy.
3. Later on we shall make reference to the reverential love present in both prayers.
4. Both are part of the liturgical prayer of the Church and are directly related to the Divine Office.

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- (1) Compare DC1, pp. 25-26.
 - (2) *ibid*, p. 27.
 - (3) *ibid*, p. 27.
 - (4) *ibid*, p. 28.
 - (5) *ibid*, p. 28.
 - (6) *ibid*, pp. 28-29.
 - (7) Luke 2:51.
 - (8) DC1, p. 59.
 - (9) *ibid*, pp. 107-108.
 - (10) *ibid*, p. 108.
 - (11) *ibid*, pp. 110-111.
 - (12) *ibid*, p. 118.
 - (13) *ibid*, p. 135.
 - (14) *ibid*, p. 174.
 - (15) *ibid*, p. 154.
 - (16) *ibid*, p. 158.
 - (17) *ibid*, p. 159.
 - (18) *ibid*, p. 323.
 - (19) *ibid*, p. 380.
 - (20) *ibid*, p. 383.
 - (21) *ibid*, compare Claude Joly and Le Coreur.
 - (22) Compare Section 3 of Chapter IV and Section 3 of Chapter V.