

## THE LASALLIAN WAY OF FOLLOWING CHRIST (1/2)

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### 1. AN ORIGINAL IDEA

De La Salle's teaching regarding the following of Christ does not differ from what has always been traditionally taught in the Church. For example, the four different levels in the process of identification with Christ can be found in the writings of many Christian spiritual writers. It could hardly really be otherwise, and the fact that they are so clearly exemplified in De La Salle is a guarantee that the path to Christ he proposes to us is a sure one.

However, the method of following Christ proposed to us by De La Salle does have its own well-defined individuality, with characteristics that are significant without being exclusive. This individuality is composed of three elements:

#### 1.1 Cultural influences

The cultural influence that marked De La Salle was not only that of the 17th century French school of spirituality: there were many other cultural influences, which provided him with the language to express his thoughts to us. It is this language which, for better or for worse, constitutes our first contact with him. His writings contain also a great wealth of biblical and patristic texts on which his culture was solidly founded. We find in them also various philosophical, anthropological and theological concepts which have been discarded as obsolete or have been relativised, or which no longer fit in with modern thinking. We have to recognise that culture, even theological culture, evolves, becomes enriched, and adapts to the new needs of mankind.

#### 1.2 De La Salle's personal spiritual journey

We have already spoken of this when considering the following of Christ. The details of his life make his writings come alive, but in general, his reticence to speak about himself or his experiences makes it difficult to discover them.

#### 1.3 His charism

The gift of the Spirit, the special charism which De La Salle received for the good of the Church, enabled him to discover new aspects of the mystery of Christ, and to emphasise certain facets which others might not notice.

#### 1.4 The central idea: the ministerial function of the educator of youth in the Church

There is a danger of the second and third elements we have mentioned becoming obscured and undervalued because of the first. It is, therefore, essential that we appreciate them at their true value, because they reveal to us a concrete way of following Christ in the Church. This is our heritage as Brothers and one which we share with other Christian members of the Lasallian Family.

The central idea on which these three elements confer a degree of individuality is the ministry of the Christian

educator, considered from the point of view of the minister, and as it affects his pupils.

The mutual interaction of the elements we have mentioned give rise to certain factors which we were able to identify when we described the process of following Christ, and which we would like to consider now in greater detail. These factors, hidden most often by their cultural form, provide us with a real challenge: they remind us that there is no neutral or standard way of following Christ, but that we have to do so through our own lives, using the gifts God has given us, and according to the ministry we exercise in the Church.

### 2. BECOMING A DISCIPLE: A CONTINUAL INVERSION OF PERSPECTIVE

#### 2.1 Our need for conversion

Conversion, that is, the transformation of a person, the changing of his values and attitudes, his continual renewal inspired by the radicality of the Gospel, is inseparable from the following of Christ, for what is involved here is nothing less than the transformation of the "old man" into the "new man" created in the image of God.

There is always the danger, however, of reducing this process to the initial step, a sort of "gesture" of conversion, which excuses us from continuing along this road. De La Salle, aware of our natural tendency to stagnate, challenges us constantly to change our excessively human expectations and, making us dissatisfied with the level we have reached, urges us at the same time to take the next step.

This is very well illustrated by the challenge he addresses to the Brothers in the meditation for the feast of St Matthew, using as his point of departure the Apostle's reaction: "*he rose up and followed him*" (Mt 9,9): "*Have you imitated the promptitude of St Matthew, who followed the divine invitation at the first word, without thinking of his affairs, and without asking time to consider the matter? How often has Our Lord called you and how often, like St Augustine, have you answered: «Tomorrow, tomorrow I shall be converted»? Do you not still say it every day? Have you really left all from your innermost heart?»*" (MF 167,1).

The following of Christ easily turns into self-deception when our everyday life is not centred on Christ, but on ourselves; when the values of the world take priority over those of the Gospel; when we seek our own will and our own glory instead of the will and glory of God. De La Salle often uses this confrontation of attitudes to make us put aside self-deception and make specific choices about our lives. Through a series of confrontations, a christocentric process is set in motion, which brings with it, on the one hand, a liberating departure from our own egoism in order to undertake God's work; and on the other, the guarantee of our incarnation among young people, especially the poor, in whom this christocentricity becomes history and reality.

Let us try to identify some of the main inversions of perspective which lead to conversion to the Lasallian way of following Christ.

#### 2.2 From personal effort to Christ's action in us

Far from being the result of human effort, the process of identification with Christ is the result of Christ's action within us. Our effort is indispensable, but it is Christ who gives it efficacy and value. This conviction is reflected in the following prayer: "*Do in me what you wish me to do*" (CL 14,56 = EM 6,169,2). It is Christ's merits, because of our union with him, which make our actions, even the holiest ones, pleasing to God (cf. CL 17,7 = I 1,2,6).

This shifting balance between our efforts and Christ's action is often vigorously referred to in De La Salle's writings. It is interesting to compare, for example, meditations 85, 22 and 45, in that order. The context of the first, for the vigil of Christmas, is the incarnation of Jesus

Christ, who *"has been knocking at the door of your heart and has been waiting to enter, and you have not wished to receive him. And why, if not because he comes to you poor, like a slave, a man of sorrows"* (MF 85,1). The second, for Palm Sunday, has for theme the glorification of Jesus Christ, who has come *"to establish his reign in souls"* and asks us *"to receive him fully by abandoning ourselves entirely to his direction"* (MD 22,1 and 2). The third, for Pentecost Tuesday, speaks of the Holy Spirit who continues the action of Christ in us: *"for when he [the Holy Spirit] comes into a soul it is for the purpose of giving it the life of grace, or of making it act through grace [...] grace which has been given you and which Christ acquired with such pain"* and which *"the Holy Spirit with such goodness has communicated to you"* (MD 45,1)

These three meditations highlight also the part played by human freedom in this balance: *"If you would profit by the coming of Christ into your heart, you must make him master of your heart"* (MF 85,2). *"You must pay him the tribute of your actions [...] allowing him to reign over all your interior movements"* (MD 22,1 and 2). *"You have become free with the freedom of the children of God. [...] You must show that you are moved by the impulse of the Spirit of God"* (MD 45,1 and 3).

The military connotations of some of De La Salle's language (normally borrowed from St Paul) underscore the dramatic character of the balance between our efforts and the action of Christ: *"You must fight under his standard the enemies of your salvation...He must be able to raise up an army composed of the virtues which should adorn your soul...You must likewise combat valiantly...using the weapons he places in your hands"* (MD 22,1,2 and 3). *"The flesh with its desires fights against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh"... "If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the flesh (that is, by the Spirit of God who dwells in you), you will live"* (MD 45,2).

The final outcome of this shifting balance is union with Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit as the only acting agent in our life: *"That is the reason why the Son of God came down on earth, and that is why he wishes to come into our heart, in order to make us sharers in his nature"* (MF 85,3). *"So that you can truly say: «It is Christ that lives in me»"* (MD 22,2). *"This is the only way in which you may belong entirely to Jesus Christ"* (MD 45,2).

### 2.3 From concern because of our sins to the contemplation of Christ our Saviour

The shift from the first position to the second can be seen clearly in the EM. The series of acts that De La Salle suggests to beginners prevents too much concentration on oneself, and leads quite naturally to the mystery of Christ: Even in "the three acts which refer to ourselves", whose language is permeated with pessimism and contempt for human nature, our attention is directed towards our Saviour, his love, his merits, his example, and the forgiveness he offers.

We see this same shift in the meditations. In spite of the apparent insistence on our sins, this often serves simply as a springboard to make us draw close to Christ, trusting firmly in his love: *"We who have been born in sin and have lived in a sinful state, should conform ourselves to Jesus Christ [...] neither affliction, nor distress nor hunger [...] should be able to separate us from the love of Jesus Christ, who loved us so much as to deliver himself up to death for love of us"* (MF 152,1).

### 2.4 From penance in order to become perfect to union with the suffering Christ

De La Salle's insistence on mortification, the refusal of comfort and the refusal to satisfy the senses, clearly reflects (in the way it was formulated) certain anthropological and theological positions which have now been abandoned. He does not propose this as a means to acquire the greatest possible perfection, but rather to make up in or own bodies *"what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ"*. What is lacking in each one of us is *"the acceptance of his will, the union of our sufferings with those of Jesus Christ, as members of his body, suffering with him and for him"* (MR 195,1). Behind this language, however, which may sound outmoded to modern ears, we should realise that the "avidity" for mortification which we find in De La Salle's writings, was common, not only to the classical ascetics, but also to the great mystics such as St Teresa, St John of the Cross, St Francis of Assisi. It was for them a way of dying, not through a love of death, but in order to enter into Life, the life that Christ earned for us by his death. Our mortification becomes a testimony of Christ living in us: *"Try...to let no day pass without mortifying yourself in some way ...through a motive of religion and to give witness to the one you profess"* (MF 176,3).

According to De La Salle, then, penance is not self-centred but Christ-centred. He does away with the classical distinction between the ascetic and the mystical: through the action of the Spirit, they become part of the same dynamic process that plunges us into the mystery of Christ: *"I renounce, therefore my spirit, in order to surrender and abandon myself completely to the guidance of your Spirit and of yourself, so that, acting only in you and for you, the penance I shall do may become yours, and that it may be you who perform it in me"* (CL 17,216 = I 3,38,2).

### 2.5 Renouncing the world in order to give oneself to Christ

The world whose values are opposed to those of the Kingdom, the world which hates Christ and his followers (Jn 15,18), the world which rejects the word of Christ and those who preach it (Jn 17,14f) is another source of tension for the follower of Christ. This world, to all appearances, we have left; but the world we find most difficult to leave is within ourselves, the world which manifests itself in our nature and in our inclinations which run more or less counter to the Gospel. De La Salle often returns to this fact and insists on renunciation as a condition of conformity to Christ: *"You who have left the world to follow Christ in a life of retreat, should make it your chief concern to give yourself entirely to him"* (MD 59,1).

There is no compromise possible: the alternative is clear: *"By associating with the world we become imbued with its spirit. But since this is opposed to the spirit of Christ and both cannot dwell together, if we become impregnated with that of the world, we shall necessarily lose that of Christ"* (MF 182,1).

This break with the world is not something exclusive to the Brothers. On the contrary, they have to include it in the teaching they give their pupils: *"It is necessary...that those who have been entrusted with them should take special care to instruct them according to the Christian spirit, which gives them the wisdom of God...which is totally opposed to the spirit and wisdom of this world and for which they must inspire them with great horror"* (MR 194,2).

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