

**La Salle's  
«Women of Proven Worth» (Prv31:29)  
(2/2)**

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As consecrated persons, separated from the world and seeking a close union with God, the Brothers also needed to practice some of the basic Christian virtues. For instance, because their apostolate, so important to the Church, was not highly esteemed by most people, from Elizabeth of Hungary they could learn to develop humility by accepting the humiliations which were certain to be part of their lives. These the Brothers were to perceive «as coming from God, and as being the greatest honors and blessings you could possibly receive in this world.» Then his disciples «would be content, no matter what happens.» (190:3) Also, their work would require of them a zeal similar to that shown by Monica who, undaunted by difficulties, helped bring her son Augustine back to God. (122:3) Such a zeal, though, could only exist and endure if it was based on a great faith, similar to that of Martha, a faith the Brothers were encouraged to admire and to develop. (147:3) However, as La Salle insisted in other places, a deep faith had to be based on and spring from a knowledge of the Scriptures. Here Catherine of Alexandria was presented to them as a model both to admire and to imitate. (192:1)

Called by God to teach his word to children, particularly poor children, (133:3, 86:2) like Margaret of Scotland, the Brothers had to develop «a real love for them.» This they could do, he said, only if his disciples saw, honored, and served Jesus Christ himself in their person. Therefore, Margaret, Elizabeth as well as Catherine of Alexandria were presented to them as models of how they should view the poor students with whom they worked. (133:3, 190:2, 192:2) Also at the same time, the Brothers were warned to guard against the all too real danger of preferring students who in any way were «better off» to those who were really poor. Again Margaret was cited as an example of how they should think and act in this matter. (133:3)

According to La Salle, the main role of the Brothers as teachers was to «instill the Christian spirit » into their students. (2:2, 194:2) This he insists is essentially a spiritual, not merely a human task, requiring the grace and help of God if it is to be done well and in a proper manner. (3:2,3, 195:2,3) So in various places the Founder reminded his sons that, as in the case of Anne, it is an «extraordinary application to prayer» which draws down the grace and favor of God that one needs to do such a task. (146:2) Also, it was by her prayers that Monica won over first her husband and then her son Augustine to God. In the latter instance, it was because «She prayed...unceasingly for his conversion...that she had the happiness of seeing him change his way of life completely.» (122, 1,2,3) Necessary and efficacious as it is, though, at times prayer alone might not be enough. So when necessary, La Salle suggested that the Brothers add penance and mortification to prayer, and Magdalen of Pazzi and The-

resa are presented as models for them in this matter. Also the Saint told his disciples that by accepting the sufferings which came their way as well as by mortifying themselves, they could be certain to obtain the graces they needed to be effective apostles of youth. (130:3; 177:2)

Not just in this group of meditations but in others as well, the Founder tried to prepare the Brothers to accept the sufferings they would experience because of the life style they had embraced and the work in which they were engaged. He seemed to be saying that some of them might feel that because they were trying to do the work of God and doing it as best they could, at least people would leave them alone if they would not recognize and honor their efforts to do good. However he felt constrained to tell them it would not be thus. So, citing the life of Genevieve, he described quite clearly what they should expect in return for their efforts to serve God and do his work:

«The only reward which Genevieve received in this life...was long and frequent illness, sufferings, and persecution, which she endured throughout her life, and extraordinary calumnies which were directed against her... She knew that such things were the usual reward which God gives His saints, ...In suffering...the servants of God...are thus made more conformable to Jesus Christ...We must, indeed, expect to be ill-treated in this world after having worked all our life for God. ...» (95:3)

In her turn, Catherine of Alexandria is presented as having had similar experiences. So like her the Brothers were advised to prepare themselves to expect such a «reward.» Then when difficulties came, they could accept them and even be «filled with happiness and consolation.» (192:3)

From what has been said so far, La Salle's ideal Christian teacher was a woman or man of prayer, inspired by faith and zeal to love and serve the poor, and willing to accept the suffering and even the persecution he or she might experience while doing the work of God. However being realistic, he knew that no one could become this kind of person or do these things by relying only on his or her own strength. The help of God was very necessary. So in spite of the Jansenism, so prevalent in his day, which took a completely contrary position in this matter, the Founder saw the Eucharist as a great source of this help from God. (Battersby, 1950, 100-104) Among others, Magdalen of Pazzi is one of the models he proposed in this matter. He said she chose the Carmelite Order over all others because there she could receive Communion more frequently, which was one of her greatest pleasures in life. Then the Brothers were reminded of the opportunities they also had to communicate frequently and strongly urged to make use of them. (130:2) The sisters Mary Magdalen and Martha are likewise portrayed as having had a great desire to receive Jesus, to be with him, and to have him present to them. By extension, each is presented as a model for those who want to receive Jesus frequently and regularly in Communion. Then the Brothers were encouraged to imitate the example of these two saints. (144:3; 147: 1,2)

By this time a reader might feel that La Salle was mainly describing the life styles and presenting as models some saints who were excellent examples for contemplative religious, but not for men working regularly for long hours in overcrowded classrooms so as to teach poor children how to be good citizens first of this world and then of heaven. (160:3) However, this is far from being his intention. Most of these women were actively involved in the world around them and, like Martha, busy with many things. (Lk 10:41) Their prayers and mortifications, as well as the virtues they practiced and exemplified, did not prevent them from being good citizens of this world. Thus, reflecting on the life and activity of Genevieve, the Founder asserted, «Rest assured that the better you apply yourself to prayer the better you

will acquit yourself of the duties of your state. ...» (95:1) Catherine of Siena, whom her parents punished by requiring her to do «all that was most disagreeable and repulsive in the housework...» was described as finding these tasks no obstacle to her union with God. Rather she did these things joyfully because she was in such close union with him. (118:1) One of Margaret's principal concerns was the good management of her household which she did in a model way. She did this activity so well mainly because of her close union with God and the piety and virtues which characterized her life. (133:1,2,3) The message to the Brothers is that «...godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.» (I Tim 4:8) On this point La Salle is most emphatic.

Monica, pictured by La Salle as a model wife and mother, is also presented as exemplifying the zeal which should motivate the Christian teacher and manifest itself in his relations with his students – particularly those having personal problems or who are difficult to deal with. The Brothers are then called upon to follow her example: «Is it thus that you take every possible care to win over to God those who are entrusted to you, when you find them inclined to evil ways? Can you truly say that there is nothing you would not do to enable them to overcome their vicious tendencies?... As you are responsible for their souls, you must make every effort to place them on the path to heaven.» (122:3)

Margaret in her turn is presented as an example of those who, moved by a great zeal, do the work of God and do it as well as they can: «This Saint's principal duty was...seeing that all those who composed her household had the fear and love of God. She herself performed the functions of tutor to her children, giving them reading lessons, and applying herself with all possible care to their education, for she rightly considered that this work was the most agreeable to God that she could do...

St. Margaret is a striking example of what you should do with regard to the children whom God has confided to your care. Here you see a Queen making it her chief concern to do that which constitutes the essential object of your state. Let it be an honor for you to do the same, and look upon those whom God has entrusted to you as the children of God himself. Take much more care over their education and instruction than if they were the sons of a king.» (133:2)

Such efforts on their part, La Salle told the Brothers, would not be in vain. For first, after discussing the early life of Monica, he exclaimed: «What a happiness it is to be reared in piety from one's youth! It is then easy to persevere during one's whole life...» Then his religious sons were encouraged to try to give their students the same advantages this saint had been given by her pious parents. And while telling them they can do this, the Founder stressed the good results such efforts on their part will produce. (122:1)

Then, regarding the early life and training of Theresa, he said: «How fortunate are those who begin early in life to serve God! Piety, having been as it were imbibed with the maternal milk, takes such firm possession of the heart that it can never afterwards be wholly lost. ...From this example we learn how advantageous it is to inspire children with piety... Since God has called you to give a Christian education to the young, you should make use of all the means which Providence took with regard to St. Theresa, in thus giving her so many graces.» (177:1)

Other instances in which the holy priest expressed similar ideas could easily be cited, all of which present this as an essential part of the Brothers' work that in time will produce comparable good results. However, at this point it seems safe to say that most of the main ideas found in these meditations have been brought out in sufficient detail. So what conclusion can be drawn from all of this?

From what the meditations say about these saintly women it seems evident that La Salle saw them as models both of the Brothers' apostolate and of the spiritual life which alone can make their work fruitful. It is in this light that he presented them for the prayerful consideration of his religious sons. At the same time, however, it can be noted that these Lasallian meditations say «nothing new.» In much more numerous meditations about the lives of male saints, these individuals are also presented to his disciples as models of the various aspects of their lives. At the same time, though, they do show that the Founder could recognize merit wherever he saw it. Particularly this was so in the case of saints who could show his religious sons how they should live and do the important work God had entrusted to them. In brief, all these saints were portrayed as «women of proven worth,» (Prv 31:29) from whom the Brothers could learn how to become worthy apostles as well as how to build the kingdom of God in this world. At the same time, La Salle's choice of these saints as subjects for his meditations, along with his letters to Sister Françoise de Saint Agnes and other nuns and pious women, do give us other and different insights about how he regarded women. These views contrast significantly with the one presented by both Maillefer and Blain in their descriptions of the incident regarding his grandmother, Mme. Moet de Brouillet. So these writings of the Saint himself as well as the accounts of his pioneer biographers should be kept in mind when trying to form a complete and accurate picture of the man who was John Baptist de La Salle.

*N.B.: The numbering system for the Meditations is that used in the French edition of 1922 (Paris: Procure Générale, cinquième édition).*

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