

Meditation 63
For the 10th Sunday after Pentecost
On self-contempt.
(1/2)

Brother Joseph Le Bars

I think that meditation 63 is such that any study of it is bound to furnish a lot of material that is instructive. It is the last meditation in the so-called «short cycle» of meditations for Sundays, which begins with meditation 13. It is not possible to assign specific dates to them. Meditations 8 to 13 correspond to Sundays which occur between January 14th and February 20th. It is possible they were composed during this same period.

The short meditations in the series on the principal feasts begin on January 17th.

Despite these unanswered questions, the fact remains that meditation 63 brings the short cycle to a close. It is a short meditation intended for a Sunday which occurs some time between July 19th and August 21st. It was possibly composed during this same period. In the first edition (CL 12), it is only 58 lines long, spread over 3 points of respectively 16, 18 and 23 lines.

The title.

The title of the meditation is: **On self-contempt.**

As likely as not, readers are surprised, if not shocked, by this title, even though the meaning of «mépris» (self-contempt) altered in the course of the 18th century.

We find the following meanings in the dictionaries of Furetière and Trévoux: Furetière 1701: «snub, disdain, the opinion one has of a person considered of no importance, a sign denoting a lack of esteem for something. The most difficult thing for a gentleman to accept is contempt. A true Christian has contempt for all worldly vanities. Of all ways in which one can offend a person, contempt is the one he feels most deeply».

The 1721 edition of the Trévoux dictionary says much the same.

The 1771 Trévoux gives: «Contempt, an attitude which makes one consider a person or a thing unworthy of one's esteem.

Contempt becomes more or less offensive according to the rank and quality of the person to whom it is directed».

Both Furetière and 1721 Trévoux define the verb «mépriser» (to have contempt for, to despise) as follows: «To despise, consider something of no importance, show contempt for it. It is better to despise oneself for no reason than to esteem oneself without question. One does not despise all who have vices, but one despises those who have no virtues».

Despite the toning down of the language in the 1771 edition, the word «contempt» still seems a little strong. If we are to love others as we love ourselves, we really ought to have a better opinion of ourselves than simply contempt.

1st Point.

The inspiration for this meditation appears, at first sight, to be the Gospel parable of the Pharisee and the Publican.

However, as we shall see later, this could be a false impression. The meditation does not begin in the usual way by referring to the Gospel text. Instead we find the statement:

Self-contempt is one of the most powerful means of acquiring virtue.

The Founder's intention seems to be to urge his Brothers to acquire virtue. The reason he gives for his choice of subject is that: «As the Wise Man says, pride and a high opinion of oneself are the root of all sin...»

His intention, therefore, seems to be to condemn pride, not pride per se, but as the root of all sin. Hatred and horror for sin are a leitmotiv in De La Salle's writings. «Sin» is one of the words that occurs most frequently in De La Salle's vocabulary: it is used 2,592 times, and comes second noun in order of frequency.

If, therefore, De La Salle considers pride to be the root of all sin, it is not surprising that he condemns it here in unequivocal terms. As we read in DB 2,17,1: « - What is the opposite of vice and sin? - It is virtue. - What is virtue? - It is an inclination and a facility to do good.»

We can see De La Salle's reasoning: if we are to acquire virtue, that is, a facility for doing good, we must fight vice and sin, the root of which, as Holy scripture says, is pride.

The Brothers were familiar with the Duties in all its various forms which, nowadays, are classified as DA, DB, DC, or GA, PA. They studied and taught them. For them, words such as «virtue», «vice» or «sin», were part of a well-known context. The Founder concludes by saying:

There is no man, however holy or favoured by grace, who should not have contempt for himself and for everything that concerns him.

This does not appear to be a continuation of the Wise Man's words, but it is still impressive as a categorical statement.

One might be justified in thinking that the solution offered is somewhat extreme. De La Salle says much the same thing on a number of occasions and, in particular, in MF 112,1: «May all the graces we receive, be they ever so precious, serve only to humble us, and make us consider ourselves the lowest of all».

He says this regarding Our Lady's humility at the Annunciation. Humility is a subject he refers to often.

The use of «humility» is more acceptable, somehow. Perhaps, this is so because there is something noble about humility, and because it is part of normal religious vocabulary. As for contempt... We are urged to be humble, but any contempt we may have for others is condemned.

The word «contempt» occurs only 9 times in the MD, but it does not have the meaning found in MD 63, where it is used 6 times.

De La Salle justifies the words «there is no man, however holy...», by adding:

What contempt does not man deserve, whose very being does not belong to him, but to God who gave it to him, and who can take it back and destroy it whenever he likes.

What a line of reasoning! «Man» here refers to mankind as a whole. The Founder must be speaking here of self-contempt, since the whole of mankind is involved. It should be said that self-contempt is not actually the normal reaction of people. As in the case of original sin, it is more likely to be revolt against God.

The Founder follows the same line of thought in EM 2,40: «If God were to cease for one moment...to give us being, we would instantly fall into nothingness».

In the meditation, he says the same thing more brutally: «and destroy it when he likes». What kind of God is he talking about? Do his words reveal the influence of the power of an absolute monarch, whose decrees always ended with «for this is our good pleasure»? Is this how De La Salle saw God at this time? It certainly is not his view in his other

writings, especially in EM 29ff. «What a grace, then, God grants us by making us, by his divine power and by his dwelling within us, to be what we are...» (EM 2,41).

The Founder then moves on without transition to another line of reasoning:

Or what subject of self-esteem can we find in a life which is nothing but sin, and from which, of our own accord, we are unable to rise?

De La Salle seems to follow here a more normal line of reasoning: dependence leads to a desire for independence, which leads to sin.

We cannot tell how De La Salle saw God at the time. His circumstances were unusual too.

The sentence we quoted from Furetière earlier, that «one does not despise all who have vices, but one despises those who have no virtues», describes a more normal human reaction to the situation referred to by the Founder.

De La Salle moves on from these general considerations to a specific application:

Such is the condition in which you are;

Even if his listeners did not shudder at his opening words, at this point they must have been thoroughly shaken, or even disheartened. One would have thought that, since the Founder was speaking in general terms, he could have said «in which we are», or at least, «in which some of us are».

At the end of the 2nd point De La Salle quotes psalm 51: «My sin is always before me...» In this case too, he surely could have found something less personal than: «in which you are...».

And, as if he had not said enough already, he adds:
and yet, to hear you speak, one would imagine that you were someone important.

He seems to be saying: «But, just look at yourselves!»

It is not as if this text were intended for an individual Brother. Nor does it seem either to be a quotation from Galatians 6,3: «It is the people who are not important who often make the mistake of thinking that they are».

What could have happened to provoke such an outburst?

According to the biographers, the Founder did not have the reputation of expressing his feelings in a loud or violent manner. All the same, we read in Blain II, p. 234: «He seemed to forget his normal gentleness if he saw a person showing a lack of respect in church: he would reprimand them very bluntly». «When he witnessed an offence against the silence, modesty and respect required by the presence of the Son of God...he was filled with a holy indignation...and would say to them in a severe and sharp voice: «Do you not realise that you are in the house of God?»» We read also of his reprimand to a Brother who leant against the altar in church: «Is that the way, my dear Brother, that we ought to behave in this holy place?» The rest of the congregation...remained exceptionally respectful for the whole of the Mass".

Could De La Salle's outburst have been provoked by some such incident? It is not something pleasant to read in a meditation, all the same. He ends in a subdued tone with a digression, unless, of course, it was the Brothers' attitude to prayer or during prayer, that had provoked the outburst in the first place.

This is what he says:

Do not imitate this Pharisee who, instead of praying to God, thinks only of praising and congratulating himself.

But what is this sentence doing here, tacked on to the end of the point as it is? Are the words «pray» and «praising oneself» connected with «and yet to hear you speak...»?

The whole of point one, instead of being a commentary on the Gospel, simply serves as an introduction to it. This is somewhat difficult to understand. I think that something must have happened to make De La Salle write like this.

2nd point

In the last sentence of point 1, De La Salle speaks of the Pharisee, and only of him. This reference to the Pharisee only may seem surprising, given the subject of the meditation: the Pharisee does not practise self-contempt at all: this is left to the Publican. The clue to the Founder's intention lies in the word «pride».

And then we see that the first point is, in fact, all about pride. Pride is the root of sin. It is pride that needs to be chastised, and this is done by practising the opposite, that is, self-contempt. Hence the final sentence: «Do not imitate this Pharisee...»

Luckily there is this connection between the two points, because point 2 looks very much like an insert. It concentrates on one lesson that can be drawn from the parable, in particular, one that concerns the way we speak. Of the 19 lines belonging to this point, the first 11 re-tell the Gospel story, and the other 8 speak of the lesson that should be drawn from it. There is no mention of contempt. There is an invitation to correct one's faults. And then, in point 3, the subject of self-contempt reappears, and there is no further mention of the Gospel.

Point two begins with:

Jesus Christ, seeing that most men are so full of themselves,

It is a somewhat pessimistic view of people to say «most men». Judging by the 20 meditations for Sundays which follow, De La Salle's pessimism is deep-rooted. It would be interesting to find out why this is so.

The expression «full of themselves» occurs only twice in the Lasallian Vocabulary. Does this imply borrowing? Be that as it may, the expression is interesting.

The text goes on:

that often if they speak it is of themselves and in their own favour...

Should we attach any importance to the use of «if» instead of «when»? On the other hand, the two words are often interchangeable. But why the verb «speak»?

The Founder warns the Brothers about this kind of behaviour in the Rule, in particular in the chapter on recreation. He writes: «*They will not speak of themselves, their relatives, their country, nor of what they have done, nor even of what they have seen or heard*» (R 6,7).

Jesus Christ

proposes the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The former pretended to pray, but in reality his mind was filled with thoughts of his own good qualities;

Why does De La Salle change the Gospel text, which reads: «was praying quietly in the following manner», into «pretended to pray»?

We have here two different ways of looking at prayer. One consists in «raising up the mind and heart to God». This Pharisee's prayer does not seem to fit this description. The other consists in the repetition of formulas of prayer. This kind of prayer has always existed, and it existed among the Pharisees also. But, here it is not a question of formulas, but of spontaneous prayer: the Pharisee was speaking to God.

The Founder is not overfond of vocal prayer: «Their prayer would be no longer simply a prayer from the heart, but would degenerate into a vocal prayer; which would not have the same usefulness for them, as it would if it were produced in them by the Holy Spirit» (EM 6,174).

It is readily understandable that De La Salle does not consider the Pharisee's prayer as genuine. It is enough to recall the importance he attaches to putting oneself in the presence of God in the Explanation of the Method of Mental prayer (Cf. EM 2,39ff), to the awareness of who God is (Cf. MD 70) and to the respect we owe him.

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