

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

Brother Joseph Le Bars

the latter, who considered himself a great sinner and humbly asked for God's mercy, was justified because of the simple and humble way in which he prayed.

It is useful to recall at this point what De La Salle said about this parable in MD 38,3: «When you pray, therefore, let it be with so much humility that God will not be able to refuse you anything you ask».

the other, instead, left filled with confusion.

Why confusion (remorse)? There is nothing in the text of the Gospel to support the use of this word.

for his prayer had been an outrage to God.

The word «outrage» is used only 4 times in the MD, and three times with reference to the Apostles. The use of «outrage» here with reference to God is the only instance of the kind in the MD.

De La Salle, as a product of his times, is very sensitive where honour is concerned. This is something that audiences of Le Cid and of other plays by Corneille would readily understand. Words such as «insult» and especially «to insult», and somewhat less frequently, «outrage» and «to outrage», were part of De La Salle's normal language, in particular when speaking of persons who did not behave with the requisite respect towards God. This explains also the importance that the use of «contempt» takes on in MD 63.

Whereas at the end of point 1 we read: «Do not imitate this Pharisee who, instead of praying...»

In point 2, De La Salle, referring to the behaviour of both the Pharisee and the Publican, says:

This is a model that Jesus Christ gives you and which you should always bear in mind.

The use of the word «model» is somewhat confusing here. Nowadays, a model is a person or a thing to be imitated. This was no doubt the case also in the 17th and 18th century. «Example» or «case» would have been more appropriate.

in order to induce you never to speak of yourself or to think of yourself.

Was this written before the Rule? If not, there might have been a reference to the following: «The Brothers will not speak of themselves, nor of their relatives...» (R 6,7).

The last extract from point 2 («in order...») harks back to the words: «that often if they speak it is of themselves and in their own favour». There is no reference to this in Luke's Gospel. Perhaps there is a tradition involved. The word «think», on the other hand, does occur.

This is a curious passage. De La Salle does not seem to be speaking about prayer but about conversation. The chapter of the Rule referred to above deals with recreation. And yet,

the real context of this parable is prayer and the humble attitude we ought to have in prayer.

De La Salle continues:

and when you think of yourself in God's presence, think only of humiliating yourself and of looking for the means to correct your faults.

Worth noting is the expression «in God's presence» which gives this self-examination its value. Discernment takes place with reference to God's will - «in God's presence» - and, therefore, in a context of prayer.

«Think only of humiliating yourself»: this is the reason for the act of humility in mental prayer. «*It is very correct that we reflect within ourselves*» (EM 5,152) and of the act of confusion: «*It is still very useful to be remorseful in his presence, in view of our sins, and to enter into the disposition and the sentiments of the Publican of the Gospel*» (EM 5,154). In both cases, De La Salle refers to the same parable.

«And of looking for the means to correct your faults». This is the purpose of the act of application, which follows directly the act of contrition, and in which present, particular and efficacious resolutions are made (Cf. EM 9,226f).

The Founder concludes:

When you pray, often repeat like David: «my sin is always before me.

What possible connection is there between «When you pray...» and the reminder «never to speak of yourself or to think of yourself»?

All that one can say is that it recalls the subject of point 1: the root of sin is pride; our lives are filled with sin.

Is it this that should make us humiliate ourselves and have contempt for ourselves?

3rd point

Self-contempt cannot be pushed too far.

And so here we are again back to the subject of point 1. One would be justified in thinking that a better place for point 3 would be immediately after «and yet, to hear you speak, one would imagine that you were somebody important» in point 1.

The digression on prayer in point 2 broke up a particular train of thought to which we now return:

Saint Francis, great saint though he was, esteemed himself the greatest sinner in the world.

After the model of the Pharisee, we now have another type of model. Was this model inspired by some author known to De La Salle?

The words underlined in the above extract are identical with those we find in Beuvelet's meditation for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, entitled «**On the lack of esteem one should have for oneself**». One cannot help being struck by the similarity between the two titles. Beuvelet's is clearly more acceptable. Why did the Founder choose the one he did which, in my opinion, was bound to shock? Unless, of course, De La Salle wanted to administer a salutary shock. The sentence referring to St Francis occurs in point 2 of Beuvelet's meditation. It reads as follows: «St Francis esteemed himself the greatest sinner there was in the world».

The sentence is not original. It was regularly used in lives of the saints. I think that the ordinary Christian puts such sentiments down to the saint's humility, but finds it difficult to accept such an attitude as genuine, since he is aware that, from time to time, even he himself performs good actions. This only goes to prove that progress still remains to be made in humility.

others have done things unworthy of a man in order to be despised.

This is difficult to accept. It is interesting to note in Blain I, p. 254, that the author, after referring to «De La Salle's attraction to contempt», says the following of Br. Bourlette: «His only ambition was to destroy his own image in the

minds of others and to lose their esteem. More than once, M. de La Salle had needed all his firmness and authority to prevent this lover of contempt from going beyond the boundaries of prudence. He constantly asked permission to go around the streets of his home town, in the sight of his relatives, friends and fellow townsmen, dressed in a red doublet and with a woollen bonnet on his head, so as to force them to give him the treatment justly reserved for fools, and to treat him as such».

It seems as if this Brother was not the only one to harbour such ideas, and he was in good company with De La Salle who, however, did not need to ask permission.

You who have crucified Jesus Christ by your sins.

MD 63 attributes this quotation to Heb 6,6.

We are back to invectives again. This is strong language, coming on top, as it does, of «*whose life is nothing but sin*» in point 1. It is all the more horrifying if this quotation is really inspired by the letter to the Hebrews, because in it St Paul speaks of «sinners who cannot be renewed by penance» (Heb 6,6).

Surely, it would have been adequate to say, as in MD 27,3, that «*As St Paul says, we crucify him again*». Fortunately, there follows:

Conform yourself to him by sentiments of humility.

It is a puzzling sentence. But the Founder does not indicate that these sentences are quotations. We were led to believe that they were, and the attribution to Heb 6,6, enabled us to label the first as an invective in the spirit of point 1.

However, if we re-read the two sentences which, in some way, are linked, their real meaning becomes clear. If Jesus Christ, who was innocent, humiliated himself, how much more you, who crucified Jesus Christ, should be disposed to do so. This interpretation is strengthened by the reference to Ph 2,5-6. We are referred also to MF 112,2, which was mentioned on page 2 of this article. In this meditation, De La Salle does not concentrate on the humility of Christ, who «abased himself, taking the nature of a slave», but on his gift of himself. It would be very helpful to have De La Salle's references, or at least, an indication when he uses quotations.

and looking upon yourself with eyes of faith,

This view of faith is the one in EM already quoted. It reflects also what DA says of man created by God and redeemed (DA 103,0,9ff). It recalls also De La Salle's words in point 2: «when you think of yourself in God's presence».

consider only what is capable of inspiring you with a low opinion of yourselves before God and men.

The expression «a low opinion of yourselves» occurs also in the meditation of Beuvelet already quoted, «On the lack of esteem one should have for oneself», in which we read, a few sentences after our previous quotation: «The reason for the low opinion we should have of ourselves, says St Bernard...».

«Before God and men». This repeats what we read in point 2 of MD 63: «*and when you think of yourself in God's presence, think only of humiliating yourself...*».

Since, therefore, God gives his grace to the humble

This quotation comes from 1 P 5,5. Seen with the eyes of faith, it is the justification for the attitude De La Salle recommends to the Brothers:

You ought, both exteriorly and interiorly, to practise self-contempt, and to take pleasure therein.

Does the explanation of the reason for this meditation lie here? The Brothers had suffered outrages and contempt, but had protested and even rebelled.

You have numerous occasions of doing so in your state and employment.

They were aware of this. Perhaps «interiorly» and «exteriorly» meant «in the house» and «outside, in the streets». Is this not what is referred to in MD 76,2: «*Some bear patiently all the humiliating things which are said to them in the streets; but if they are reprimanded in the house, if they are told their defects, or if they are humiliated on some occasion or other, they are upset*».

Outside...In Blain II, pp. 469-470, we find the following account: Some Brothers, who had been assaulted in the street by two hooligans, complained to the local chief of police. When the Founder came to hear of it «he was very upset. No one had ever seen him so distraught before, nor show so much emotion. The cause of his pain was the fact the Brothers had lodged a complaint...he would not accept any excuses. «The Brothers must suffer everything and not make others suffer». He quoted the example of the Apostles «who left the presence of the Sanhedrin, glad to have had the honour of suffering for the sake of the name of Jesus». He quoted this passage with zeal that seemed to devour him...he quoted it in Latin, which was unusual for him, and something he did only when he felt very deeply about something...during meetings when he wished to inspire the Brothers with the spirit of Jesus crucified...he would be caught up by a holy enthusiasm, speaking like a person who has lost all self-awareness, and who is moved and animated by the Spirit of God". The incident took place in Rouen in 1716.

Was De La Salle's emotional language in this meditation provoked by this incident or by some other similar one? (See Lasalliana 43-4-A-189.)

To urge yourself to profit by them, consider them as excellent means of sanctification, looking upon yourselves as the weakest of all men and as the least capable of doing any good.

The explanation of this meditation surely lies in this third point. The first point, I think, should be seen as an exercise in accepting humiliation, rather like those once common during the novitiate, but somewhat more violent, in this case.

Thank God for the grace he gives you to be despised, covered in shame and calumniated. Never display any esteem for what you do, since God, by his goodness and his grace, is the author of all that is good in you.

See 1 Co 4,7: «If it was given, how can you boast as though it were not?»

I think the meaning of this meditation as a whole lies in its overall tone. If it means what I think it does, the final paragraph can be considered as «an act of review of what one has accomplished in mental prayer», an «act of thanksgiving», and a reminder to make a resolution.

It is difficult not to wish to be more humble after reading this meditation, given that we can accept some of its harshness through a spirit of faith.

References to the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican in the writings of the Founder:

Publican:

EM 5,154; MD 38,3; MD 63,2; DA 104,5,3; DA 307,5,23; DA 401,3,7; DA 402,1,14; DA 402,2,14; I 3,10,2.

Pharisee:

MD 38,3; MD 63,1; DA 104,5,3; I 3,8,1.

Beuvelet's work: *Méditations sur les principales vérités chrétiennes et ecclésiastiques pour tous les Dimanches, Fêtes...* vol.III, à Paris, chez Georges Josse, rue s. Jacques, à la Couronne d'Espines, 1657. •