

LASALLIAN IDENTITY AND SHARED MISSION (2/3)

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2. THE ROAD TO SHARED MISSION DEPENDS ON HOW MINISTRY IS SEEN.

A) LIVING IN A “MINISTERIAL SITUATION”.

The Kingdom of God is that which justifies the very existence of the Church; the Church is a sign of the Kingdom and her mission is to proclaim it. In the same way, our existence as “Christians” is justified in our desire to follow Jesus, that is to say, by conforming ourselves to his plan, the Kingdom of God. In “Christian” language we can say that the Kingdom of God is proclaimed where God finds accommodations. Jesus, who is the presence of God among us, is identified with the Kingdom of God. That is how his disciples saw him so that, while the Synoptic Evangelists present Jesus as announcing the Kingdom, in the Acts of the Apostles he is seen as being proclaimed by them. And so it is that with Jesus, at Easter, the Kingdom becomes present in paradigm form.

With this “paradigm” which is Jesus, the Kingdom continues being proclaimed. It is up to us as Christians to discover the presence or the incarnation of God in our present-day world and to serve him where we discover him.

But God makes himself present in thousands of different ways in our world; therefore there also must be thousands of different ways of serving God. It is also true that He has his preferences and predilections as to where he will be incarnated as his been revealed so often: he prefers the poor, the marginalized, situations involving injustices, children, the weak, the sick...that is to say, all those who need to be freed and saved the most. It is therefore in them where he most wants to be served.

Each of those manifestations of God requires a special sensitivity in order to perceive it as a “God-enlightened space” for me: God approaches me and calls me in this concrete circumstance of history. Each must ask himself for the “burning bush” that must be approached “barefoot”, ready to adore God in that place and serve him because he will be sent to that place to save his people.

The “burning bush” is that situation of need that awakens an uneasiness within me: something that pushes me to come nearer. In the measure that I approach I realize that it is God himself who is pushing me to commit myself (all of this is

based on a foundational experience of faith), and it is He who sees through my eyes and hears through my ears and who moves in my heart...I find myself being sent by Him at the same time that I find in my person the necessary gifts to respond to him. That is my charism, the grace of God that permits me to recognize him and urges me to serve him, even though in my fear I may prolong my “stammering” as did Moses. It is precisely this consciousness of my limitations that brings me to the point of sharing mission with others: “Your brother Aaron will speak for you”. The guarantee of the charism is this: “I will be with you” (cf. Exodus 3: 1-7).

So then, John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers found their “burning bush” in the world of children who were in need of education. They were “moved” by the call of God towards the human and Christian maturing of children and they felt an urge to serve God in this way. They describe it in these words in the original Rule:

“The need for this Institute is very great since the artisans and the poor ordinarily have little education themselves and since they are busy all day earning a living for themselves and their children they cannot themselves give their children the instruction they need nor an upright and Christian education” (Common Rule 1.5).

Starting from that moment, the world of Christian education became for De La Salle and the Brothers a “ministerial situation”, that is to say, “an historical situation in which God makes himself known and in which God incarnated is served through young people”:

“Recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children whom you have to instruct. Adore him in them” (Meditation 96.3).

De La Salle helps us to take the next step in faith, when he invites us to act as “representatives” of God since it is He who has sent us. More precisely, it is God incarnated, Jesus Christ:

“You are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ in the work that you do...” (Meditation 195.2).

In this entire process there has not been any “official approval”. Education, even Christian education, continues being a “profane” situation, that is to say, one that has reference to human culture and maturation. The key that we have introduced consists in discovering the “sacramentality” of the human situation: entering into its “transparency” of the divine, because God has been incarnated in our world. From this key point we will be able to perceive the sense of our lay ministry: to be a sign of the presence of God in the environment of the “mundane”. Here is where Lasallian spirituality comes up with light for the situation: *“Look at nothing but with the eyes of faith...”*. This is how the experience that serves as the basis for our Christian identity, faith, works as a light that crosses all our human activity, making it *“transparent in God”*.

What difference is there then, among those who are busy in the same effort, those who carry it out in the “ministerial place” and those who carry it out as a simple job. The main difference is not in doing new things but in doing the same things in a different way. What we experience is made “new” in virtue of our faith and our hope: faith in the presence of God in that place (“God-enlightened space”) and hope that the Kingdom of God might be more visible in that place. It is natural that, as it is carried out in that way, it will be easier to pay greater attention to the beneficiaries, to render a greater service, to do it with greater disinterest, to be closer to persons...

B) WE RECEIVE THE “MISSION” FROM THE CHURCH.

When a Christian or a group of Christians have determined - thanks to the charism received - particular needs of the Church or of the world as an example of the presence of God, a call from God as part of a solution for those needs, then we say that that “place” in the Kingdom has become for those Christians a “ministerial place”.

When that “ministerial place” is recognized by the Church - by the hierarchy in their role of discernment - as an important part of evangelization, that it becomes a “mission”: an official commissioning or sending of a Christian or group that shows the corresponding charism in order to develop such a ministry. It is a public acceptance that this Christian or this group is a “sign” for the whole Church of the presence of God in that circumstance.

The mission received from the hierarchy adds nothing quantitatively, nor does it add anything to the presence of God in a particular service (“ministerial place”) nor to the charism received in order to carry out that service. But, in terms of witnessing to the action of God, the hierarchy, when it recognizes a ministerial reality, does offer the certitude that God is present in that activity and that the charism that is manifested in the Christian or group is authentic.

In this way the dependence that all “ministers” have on the community and on the faithful is emphasized and no ministry can be private property. Only the “mission” (the commissioning) establishes a ministry.

For De La Salle, the fact of having received this mission from the Church is yet another motive for considering the importance of the ministry within the context of the work of the Church and to take great pains in its fulfillment with an even greater zeal. But it should be noted that this does not refer only to carrying out external actions, as important as these are, but something else; it is the whole person that is affected by the ministry. It is our entire identity that becomes a **sign** for the Church.

“What ought to engage you further to have great zeal in your state is the fact that you are not only the ministers of God, but also of Jesus Christ and of the Church” (Meditation 201.2).

C) “EXERCISE, BY ASSOCIATION, THEIR MINISTRY...”

The charism that allowed John Baptist de La Salle to perceive the Christian education of youth, especially the poor, as a privileged manifestation of the Kingdom of God (“ministerial place”) was transmitted to the Institute. We Brothers are the inheritors, as a community, of that charism.

But also, in the same way, we participate as a community in the mission that the Institute has received. We carry out as a community the ministry of Christian education. The Rule of the Brothers says it like this: *“exercise, by association, their apostolic ministry of education”* (Rule, 2).

This community sense of the mission must be adequately emphasized in order to be able to grasp our identity:

“From the beginning of the Institute, the Brothers have

fulfilled their mission ‘together and by association’. Each Brother exercises his apostolate as a member of a community by whom he knows he is accepted, supported and entrusted with his mission” (Rule, 16).

* *The first consequence* of this community mission: it is not what we do, but it is the solidarity and the communion with the community that the mission has received that allows us to participate in the ministry:

“The Brothers are in solidarity with their community, with their District and with the Institute as a whole. In fulfilling their ministry, whatever their individual assignment may be, they are contributing, as a community, to the unique mission of the Institute within the Church” (Rule, 16).

* *Second consequence*: The mission that the Institute has received from the Church can be shared by Brothers, lay colleagues, priests... This common participation also takes in the spirituality and consequently, the Lasallian identity:

“Ever since the time of their foundation, the Brothers have contributed to the promotion of the Christian laity, especially among those educators who want their professional work to be a form of gospel ministry.

The Brothers gladly associate lay persons with them in their educational mission. They provide, for those who so desire, the means to learn about the Founder and to live according to his spirit” (Rule 17).

* *Third consequence*: The Community thus constituted for the Mission is as such a **mediator** of the Church in the evangelization that it carries out with young people, and at the same time it is the **sign** that the Kingdom of God is present in that place. The community is, therefore, the authentic subject of the ministry of Christian education. Each of those who participate in the community, inasmuch as they are animated by faith, experience and manifest the ministry in a complimentary way to the other members, but with different characteristics, according to their own identity: the Brother, based on his consecration as a celibate in community; the lay person, based on his life which is more directly related to secular realities and perhaps based on marriage; the priest, based on his particular situation of his sacerdotal ministry, at the service of the ministry of Christian education.

According to what we just have said, each takes on the Church ministry of Christian education - or participates in it - based on different options and charisms, by means of which he himself also finds the means for his own realization and sanctification. The multiplicity of charisms in service of the unique mission, experienced mutually in community, contributes to enrich⁶ and shape our ministr:

The faithful lay person “can no longer be closed in on himself, isolating himself spiritually from the community; but he must live in a continuous interchange with others, with a living sense of fraternity, in the joy of the same dignity and the same involvement for bringing to fruition, together with others, the immense treasure received as in inheritance...the charisms, ministries, responsibilities and services of the faithful lay person exist in communion and for communion” (CL 20).

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