

**THE GOSPEL NORM OF LIFE IN
DUTIES OF A CHRISTIAN, PART I
(1/2)**

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Introduction

The life, foundation and writings of De La Salle are undividedly coherent: procure a Christian education for young people. Before getting down to dealing with the topic in *Duties of a Christian towards God* (from now on referred to as D.C.) I want to go give evidence of how in his various writings he proposes the living out of the Gospel as the rule of behavior and the rule for Christian life.

In Chapter 2 of the Rule that he gave the Brothers of his Institute, he tells them: "The Gospel should be your first and principal Rule". There are many citations in the Meditations in which the Founder reiterates a similar recommendation. I will cite but one example. *If you wish to be filled with the mind of God and entirely fit for your work, make the sacred books of Scripture your special study, and particularly the New Testament, so that it serves as a rule of conduct both for yourselves and for those whom you instruct* (Meditation 170.1). He always mentions children alongside the Brothers! The Explanation of the Method of Making Mental Prayer suggests the normative value of the Gospel to the Brothers: *Jesus Christ is in the midst of the Brothers in order to teach them the truths of the Gospel that they instill in their hearts so that it becomes the rule of their life* (Explanation of the Method of Making Mental Prayer, page 10).

With regard to students, there are many places in his writings in which he proposes *the Gospel as a norm of life for their salvation*. I will limit myself to three texts. In the Meditations, we read: *It is, then, not enough to procure for children the Christian spirit and teach them the mysteries and doctrines of our religion. You must also teach them the practical maxims that are found throughout the holy Gospel* (197.2). When the Rules of Christian Civility discuss seriousness, it provides this reflection: *And so since every Christian ought to behave according to the rules of the holy Gospel, one must respect others, considering them as children of God and brothers of Jesus Christ* (Règles de la Bien-séance et Civilité Chrétienne, page 215). I will conclude this introduction with the exhortation to read the Gospel in the Method for following Holy Mass: *Now, my God, it is not only your Word but your Holy Law, the rule for all Christians...that I should practice...so that it might serve me as guide and rule for all my actions...during my entire life* (Instructions et prières pour la Sainte Messe, cf. Oeuvres Complètes de La Salle, Rome, 1993, page 1321).

Duties of a Christian, Part I

The D.C., in the opinion of Antoine Carion, constitutes a theology manual which is at the reach of persons of average culture. As just such manual, it is made up of body of practical truths and speculations that lead to the Christian forma-

tion of its readers. Defined in this way, the D.C. can be classified as one of the many, varied and excellent catechisms that appeared in France during the second half of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth.

Among these catechisms are those which were a source of inspiration for the author of the D.C.; but the D.C. surpasses its sources in the way it lays the foundation of doctrine in a clear way and in the way it fulfills the maxims of the Gospel. It is possible that in other catechisms the spirit of the Gospel is underlying but its structure and theological form by means of questions and answers do not allow for open reflection; on the other hand, the wording of the text in De La Salle's work allows for personal reflection. By looking at the topics we shall show that *the morality proposed by De La Salle to Christians is that morality which emanates from the Gospel or the New Law* (page 31).

Preface

De La Salle introduces D. C. with ten well-structured pages. When he defines the concept of Christian religion he says: "Persons who have committed themselves to give God the devotion that is his both in public and in private, *as Jesus Christ has taught us*. (i.e. in his Gospel) (pages II, III). We are made Christians through Baptism, sons of the Church; but not all the baptized can be recognized as authentic Christians; authentic Christians are those "who are animated by the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ and who lead a life in accord with his, *following the maxims expressed in the Holy Gospels and in the entire New Testament*" (p. V).

Faith

The short introduction to the first chapter of the first section of the work is a proclamation of the Gospel message that includes the fertile seed from which it was born and will continue to develop the doctrine given in D.C. No commentary would be able to add anything to an integral reading of the text itself: "Jesus Christ points out in the Gospel that eternal life consists in knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ, his Son, who has been sent to earth. The Christian should apply himself to this task in the present life: knowing God himself and all his works and the Son of God made man and that he as carried out our salvation. Here is where all the truths are contained that we need to know" (pages 1-2).

A thought occurs to me in line with this topic. It is significant that the words with which De La Salle opens his work are Jesus Christ and the Gospel, both used together. The content of faith is made concrete in persons, not in truths: The Triune God in itself and Jesus Christ, his Son. Knowledge of the Trinity will be accompanied by *wonders* carried out in love. Knowledge of Jesus Christ is extended to his saving work, that is to say, the Gospel.

De La Salle's conclusion is both courageous and concrete: many of the truths that the Christian should know are included in the Mysteries of the Holy Trinity, the Creation and the Redemption. A little later on he will specify what should be the believer's attitude in the acceptance of the content of that faith: *a submissive spirit and heart* (page 3); i.e., a surrendered gift of intelligence and the complete support of the person.

All the speculative truths and practices which in the following pages are structured and developed in the D.C. must be read, interpreted and experienced in the light of this proclamation, proclaimed at the very beginning. This is what we will do with the kind reader's permission.

The D.C. frequently gives binomial expressions that are mutually required, such as: *know-practice, intelligence-heart, practice-love*, etc. The obligation that the Christian has of knowing and believing the principal Mysteries of our Religion reminds him that, often and from time to time, he should make an act of faith (page 5). Sometimes, he finds it hard to go against nature, for example, offering pardon to one's enemies. Then the D.C. suggests this formula: "Jesus Christ, my Savior, I firmly believe that it is necessary to not only pardon one's enemies, but also to have to love them and pray for them and treat them well; *you have said and taught all this in the holy Gospel*" (page 6).

The Gospel and the New Law

Jesus Christ, at the beginning of his public life, attests to the proclamation made on the first page of D.C.: proclaim a new era for the relationship between God and mankind. De La Salle says: "Jesus Christ came to bring the New Law to mankind and for thirty years made himself available to proclaim it. When he returned from the desert he began to choose his twelve disciples which he called apostles, a word which means "one who is sent", because they were destined to preach his Gospel, the New Law, to all mankind" (page 31). Whenever De La Salle makes reference to the New Law - and this happens frequently - he equates it with the Gospel.

With the New Law everything has a new perspective: "the Sabbath will be for man" and not vice-versa; "an eye for an eye" will change into "love your enemies; the "he said to himself" to "I say to you"; "the God of Sinai" becomes "God the Father of Jesus Christ"; in a word the "the law of fear" becomes "the law of Love". Such was the message of Jesus Christ that "he assigned to instruct all people; and to teach them the Good News of his doctrine, having them understand in a wide-reaching sermon that showed *how much better the New Law was in relation to the old*, the perfection that was asked of them and to which they committed themselves. The crowd was astounded and delighted at his teaching" (page 33). The Gospel, the New Law valued people over precepts, it involved hearts and it respected freedom.

The Church

The Church and Tradition confirm for us the apostolic origins of the Church and they guarantee its continuation until the end of time. The Church is also the depositary of the teaching that Jesus Christ and the Apostles left here and which she should permanently preserve (63). The Church cannot either change nor can she add anything to said teaching, but she does have the ability to explain and interpret the teaching (pp. 70 and 71 passim). This means that the speculated truths and practices that the Church explains and transmits is based upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ and therefore "we should submit our spirit to *all the determinations of the Church* in matters of faith and religion, with the same simplicity that *we submit ourselves to the Gospel*" (72).

The D.C. goes into more detail about the duties of pastors than it does about the duties of Bishops; perhaps this is because the pastors are closer to the sheep. It is interesting for us to point out what might be one of the principal duties: "proclaim to them the word of God and watch over them (their souls), *for the purpose of leading them towards a life in accord with the mandates of the Holy Gospel* (78). Preaching the word is part and parcel of all the Church hierarchy: the Pope, the Bishops, priests and the faithful. For all of them the source is the Gospel and the Scripture in general.

The Commandments

Even a mere summary of the fourteen-page Introduction to the section on the Commandments of the Law of God would go beyond the scope of this reflection. I will limit myself to point out some of the passages that have a direct bearing on this paper.

For De La Salle the fulfillment of the Decalogue without love would be like a clanging cymbal but nothing else, as St. Paul says. De La Salle, supported by St. James the Apostle, declares that the essential duty for Christians is to live animated by charity;...sin is that which moves us away from charity;...the practice of this virtue is everything to which God has designed for us, since all the Commandments of God are derived from this virtue, *as Jesus Christ states in the Holy Gospel*...And the D.C., the school of Jesus Christ, sums up "all the Commandments of God" into two: "Love God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself" (90-91). *It is clear that fulfilling the commandments is based on the Gospel*.

The last paragraph of this symphonic introduction closes with the performance of the quartet: Jesus Christ, the Gospel, Charity and the Commandments. Let us listen to how De La Salle directs the orchestra: "*Jesus Christ*, it is in the Law of grace (the *Gospel*), that your *Commandments* have established, publicized and proclaimed again to your Church, in the person of your Apostles and disciples. In the same way, *the way of fulfilling them has been indicated to us*, with the help of grace and motivated by Charity which tends to love God and neighbor in a holy way" (p. 104).

Although the spirit of the New Law lies at the root of all the Commandments, from time to time it appears explicitly in light of the Gospel; for example, in the second Commandment: "You shall not make for yourself an idol. *Jesus Christ tells us in the Gospel* that this would amount to giving honor to a creature that is due to God alone". A little farther on he recalls the "suffice it to say: "Yes when you mean yes and no when you mean no" (116).

The personal evaluation that De La Salle introduces in the section on the fourth Commandment clarifies for us the difference that existed for him between the Old Law and the New: "God would not have made this promise to the Jewish people, speaking only of temporal goods, had it not been for the fact that they were stiff necked and that they considered as a piece of good luck the increase that they would be able to have on earth. On the other hand, when he promised 'a long life' to Christians who were living under the New Law, he was referring to the happiness of life that they would have in heaven and that it would be long lasting, since it would be forever" (127).

In the pardoning of one's enemies, as opposed to "an eye for an eye", the law of grace is totally accepted "because Jesus Christ has commanded it and wants us to ask forgiveness of our sins...*He gives us the example when he pardoned those who put him to death*, praying for them before he died to that the Eternal Father might pardon them" (131).

The unfolding of the eighth Commandment shows the falsehood "as one of the seven things" which the Father dislikes. In order to infuse in the Christian the withdrawal from this behavior, he *offers the testimony of Jesus Christ* who, in order to show the horror that one should have for falsehoods, "calls the devil his father" (p. 144).

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