

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

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Sin

By fulfilling the Commandments, the Christian proves to God that he loves him. On the other hand, sin “disobeys God”, (162) breaks that love relationship and establishes mankind outside of the New Law. Only on one occasion do we find in the chapter on sin a direct mention of the Gospel, which occurs in the discussion of sins against the Holy Spirit. De La Salle’s commentary can be adapted to current exegesis.

“The common sentiment about sin is that which Our Lord had in the Gospel; he indicated that sins are unpardonable; not because one cannot obtain pardon and God wants to pardon them; but because often *he does not pardon them because of the poor disposition of those who commit them*, since they reject, with contempt, all the means and helps that the Holy Spirit makes available so that we can avoid them and be protected” (182).

Virtue

The author of D.C. includes the study of Virtues immediately after that of sin “because we cannot avoid sin unless we practice virtues which are in contrast to sin” (184).

The reasons for juxtaposing virtues with vices is highly evangelical; as proof of this, we offer this: Let us distinguish Christian prudence from human prudence “in that the former *is guided by the maxims and rules of the Gospel* and is in accord with the judgment that God himself makes of things” (185).

After having defined the four cardinal virtues and their opposites in terms of capital sins, he concludes: “There are many other virtues which we are obliged to practice...Scripture and the Saints instruct us in this practice...and the example of *Our Lord Jesus Christ*” (as sketched in the *Gospels*) (187).

Evangelical Counsels

It is interesting to note that the D.C., as extensive a work as it is and written by a religious priest, never makes any mention of what we know today, in the strict sense, as the *Evangelical Counsels*. What De La Salle does present to us is a kind of exaltation of virtues “which we have the obligation to practice and which are contrary to the vices we should avoid (187). The scope of these virtues is vast and their fulfillment results in sublime perfection. The Gospel will establish the basic principles: “These counsels are listed in the Holy Gospel and in the New Testament and can be reduced to three orders: those dealing with works of mercy, the Beatitudes and the Maxims of Jesus Christ. There are abundant examples of the latter and Our Lord taught them to

the Apostles *in order that they might be practiced by those who serve him faithfully*” (182).

It would be repetitive to consider in turn each of the three sections and so we will limit ourselves to a discussion of why the Beatitudes are called such, “because Jesus Christ, as he explained them, promised that *whoever practiced them* would be happy in this life as a pledge and a sign of the happiness that will be found in heaven” (189).

One can say that it was troublesome for De La Salle not to spell out what was meant by *many other Christian practices* and therefore he concludes the chapter with the invitation: “There are still many other Christian maxims...in the pages of the New Testament...Jesus Christ calls Christians to outstanding perfection by faith as well as by the Holy Apostles and the writings they have left us...we should read them often and meditate on them so that later we might be *disposed to practice them and become perfect Christians*” (192). This is a beautiful end to the first part of D.C.

Second Part

The D. C. devotes two sections of the first part to a study of the *knowledge and love of God*, which is at the root of the principal obligation and task for Christians in this world. To know and to love demand from the subject a continual activity: this explains why in the first part there are frequent times in which Gospel practices are recommended to the Christian.

The second part of D. C. is designed as a study of the means with which the Christian will be able to fulfill his duties of knowing and loving God well, which are: Grace and Prayer. Even though all that we have is a gift from God, grace and prayer come in greater measure. The definition that the author of D. C. gives for grace makes this clear: “Grace is a supernatural quality that God bestows on the soul *in an entirely gratuitous way* in order to help us attain our salvation” (194). The Christian will have to cooperate and undergo self-renunciation in order to fulfill the conditions inherent in these means: but always the *ex opere operato* will overcome the *ex opere operantis*. With this clarification we can now get into the second part in order to realize what is pertinent to our discussion here.

The Sacraments

In several places of Chapter I’s introduction to the Sacraments he links these to the person of Jesus Christ. We will use a significant reference because of the relationship it establishes between the Sacraments and the New Law or Gospel. “Jesus Christ, who is the author of all the Sacraments of the New Law (Gospel), came to earth to sanctify mankind and has obtained new value for them...He is the one who brings them about in time and in their first cause; men, who administer them, are no more than the instruments, the dispensers of his mysteries since, says St. John, it is He who baptizes” (204). If the introduction to the section on the Commandments in D.C. was based on Charity, the section on Sacraments is based on the person of Jesus Christ and his Gospel. The consequences implied by this are clear.

It is necessary to clarify once and for all that the D.C. always pinpoints the foundational circumstances of each Sacrament by Jesus Christ and the words of its foundation when these are known in the Gospel. Some of these are not relevant to our discussion so we will omit them.

The D.C. offers the authority of the Gospel to prove the *sine qua non* need for Baptism: “Jesus Christ states clearly in the Gospel that, if one is not reborn by water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven” (211).

The Sacrament of Penance, following the custom of the time, is that which occupies the most space in the D.C. It is preceded by a short chapter that deals with Penance as a virtue. So as to strengthen the usefulness of this sacrament for all mankind, he cites the words of St. John the Baptist and of Jesus Christ himself: “If you do not do penance, you will all perish” (274).

The Sacrament of Penance is, undoubtedly, that which requires most the cooperation and the self-renunciation of the subject in order for it to be completely effective; therefore De La Salle, from the very first lines, demands the penitent’s participation. “Jesus Christ, realizing the need that men have for the Sacrament of Penance...and that the majority lack a true sorrow for their sins, and wishing that in the New Law they are given grace in a real way, that he established the Sacrament of Penance” (280).

Present-day catechesis likes to present penance as a type of metanoia, i.e., conversion experience, a change of direction for the sinner. The author of D. C. has this concept in mind, when he asks for the sinner’s collaboration: “Jesus Christ wanted this Sacrament to have exterior activity on the part of the penitent” (280).

There have been relatively few interventions in the first section of the second part; the second section will have more, because the one who prays takes an active part in prayer.

Prayer

The D.C. uses the Gospel twice to convince the Christian of the need for prayer; the first discusses prayer in general: “Our Lord Jesus Christ assures us that, if we ask for something, God will give it to us”. “Ask and it shall be given to you” (Matthew 7:7). The second deals with fighting against impurity (415-416 passim).

Among the many grounds that we might have for adopting a humble attitude in prayer, what can help us is “the disposition that Jesus Christ had in his life (Gospel) and, in a special way, in his prayer in the Garden of Olives, before his Passion”...(430).

Again the example and the word of Jesus Christ in the practice of trusting in prayer. Was it not Jesus Christ who said in the Holy Gospel: “Ask and you will receive?; why have you not asked for anything in my name?” (John 16:23). In the very next line he presents the wedding feast at Cana as an example of perseverance and trust in prayer; also how Jesus Christ taught his Apostles how to pray and the parables on prayer (pp. 432-433 passim).

With regard to the places, times and attitudes during prayer the D.C. uses testimony from the Gospel and the example of Jesus Christ, which should serve as norms for Christians:

1. Place: “When you want to pray, go to your room” (Matthew 6:6).
2. Time: “The Holy Gospels tell us that Jesus Christ often spent nights in prayer...that this is an appropriate time (remember De La Salle at St. Remigius)...and, a little later on, he says to pray continually without interruption...
3. Attitudes: Tertullian and St. Augustine recommend praying while kneeling: “So also the Apostles and St. Paul pray, imitating the example of Jesus Christ in the Garden of Olives, who knelt down with his face on the ground”...(pp. 435 to 439 passim).

De La Salle includes in Sunday Prayer all that the Christian can and should ask God for in prayer. He devotes the entire first section of Chapter III of the section on Prayer to explaining the Prayer of Jesus, pages 442-451. The commentary deals with Tertullian and St. Augustine. Needless to

say, Jesus Christ and his Gospel are also repeated in these pages. We will use only one quote which is suitable for our purposes: “St. Augustine says that Jesus Christ has given us this prayer to teach us what we should and can ask of God in a holy and humble way. This is expressed in a remarkable way in this prayer that Jesus Christ left us (in the Gospel) as a model for all prayers that we might make” (444).

This is about explaining and offering a value for different types of praying. Vocal prayer? Mental prayer? Which is preferable?... After offering various authorities, it is the New Law’s turn (the Gospel): “When Jesus Christ came to earth to establish the New Law...he taught us by his example and words to pray to God more with the heart than with the lips”...However, “this does not imply that Our Lord disapproved of vocal prayer. With regard to this he helped teach his disciples how to prayer to the Father...but also he wanted it understood that the best way of praying is by means of prayer of the heart” (pp. 47 and 472, passim).

The last section (5) of the last Chapter (V) on Prayer deals with occasions when it is appropriate to pray to God, during the day and the way to do this. De La Salle recommends to Christians that, in order to conform yourselves to the intention of Jesus Christ to pray frequently, he begs your help and wants you to unite your intentions to those which Our Lord Jesus Christ had, who faced chores similar to ours...Finally, in the Gospel the Christian will find the rule for making visits; the model is the Most Blessed Virgin in her visit to her cousin St. Elizabeth (488 to 492, passim).

Now we come to the apex of our journey and what an accomplishment it is! It would not be out of order to apply here this sentence from don Quixote: “Words worthy to be cast in bronze, sculpted in marble and painted on tables”. I will transcribe them literally and I will add a brief comment.

“The principal effect which these prayers should produce in us is that of making us practice the Maxims of the Holy Gospel. This is the primary advantage that we can obtain from a knowledge of the Holy Mysteries and the doctrine of the Church” (p. 494). The first and last pages of the D.C. are based on a teaching that is exultant and coherent, one that proclaims time and again that the speculative truths and practices that the Christian should know are based on the knowledge of the message that Jesus Christ brought us - if you will permit the redundancy - the Good News of the Gospel, namely, that eternal life consists in knowing the Father (Trinity) and Jesus Christ who he sent to the world in order to save it (cf. D.C. p.1).

Conclusion

I hope that the preceding lines might contribute to refute for some the moralistic notion with which De La Salle is sometimes charged. There is nothing further from the legalism of the Pharisees than the Gospel. De La Salle is subject to the New Law, the Father who forgives and the Son who saves. His rule is faith in Jesus Christ made Word in the Gospel. Actually, the moral part of the D.C. is the least original section of its author, who bases himself completely in his sources. On the other hand, the invitations presented above are most certainly his, when he invites Christians to conform their conduct to that of the Maxims of the Holy Gospel.

We have not attempted to study the role that the Gospel plays in the teaching of the D.C. This task, certainly an interesting one, presupposes much comparative research. A high percentage of the pages of the treatise are inspired by and offer experiential evidence of the Holy Gospel. Our intention has been very specific: *Places in the D.C. in which the Gospel appears as a norm of life for the Christian.* •