

THE MINISTRY OF THE BROTHER AND SPIRITUAL FATHERHOOD

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The question of the “ministry” of the Brother and of its nature is fundamental to the understanding of the mission of the Brother to young people in today’s world. It is also an area of debate in the relationships of the Institute and the Church since John Baptist de La Salle. In the language of the XVIIIth century, the ministry is an activity, in that it comprises a service, a responsibility, a function, in a word, a mission (1). De La Salle never confused the ministry of the priest with that of the Brother, although he sometimes mentions that they are close. To teach the articles of faith, to Announce the Gospel, is “a profession which, more than other, approaches that of the priest, by its ministry” (M.F. 186,2) (2), a sharing “in the ministry of the holy apostles and of the principal bishops and pastors of the Church” (M.R. 199, 3) (3). The sharing in a ministry arising from ordination lies on the level of evangelisation. How is this seen on the level of personal relationship with the pupil?

Tony Anatrella writes: “True brotherhood does not exist without fatherhood” (4). Far from pitting fatherhood against brotherhood, therefore, the aim of this text is to define the existence and the kind of relationship that exists between Brother and pupil – often called disciple. This relationship implies a spiritual fatherhood, in that the latter sees a precise object: to bring something to life in them. This does not prevent there being a fraternal relationship between them at the same time in the framework of an educating community. So, the first question could be phrased in the following way: Is the Brother of the Christian Schools, a Brother to young people by living a consecrated life with them and for them, in a community structured institution, called by his Founder (and by God!) to exercise a kind of spiritual fatherhood towards the person being educated, different from that of the priest? And if yes, what does it consist of? John Baptist De La Salle does not base himself on revelation, or the theology of the consecrated life, nor even of the spiritual writings of his time, to put this question. He bases it on the family

and social life of the end of the XVIIth, and the beginning of the XVIIIth century. “In the place of fathers and mothers, God, in his providence and care for the conduct of men, has put people who are sufficiently enlightened and zealous to inculcate the knowledge of God and his mysteries into children, being most careful to implant in the hearts of these children the fundamentals of religion and Christian piety” (M.R. 193, 2). Since fathers and mothers did not have the time nor the aptitude needed, John Baptist de La Salle takes a practical view of God’s providence. There is a kind of wise view, from God’s angle, in which the Brothers replace fathers and mothers in two definite ways, knowledge of the faith, the “knowledge of God and his mysteries”, and the education of affective Christianity, “to instil into the hearts” of children the seed of “Christian piety”. This disconcerting sentence which the Brother addresses to the parents, is found in another text of the “Meditations for the time of retreat”: “give us the souls and take the rest for yourselves” M.R. 201, 3). All fatherhood is from God. Therefore God, for De La Salle, is free to delegate to the Brothers the spiritual aspect of fatherhood and motherhood, introduction to Christian life. What is even more disconcerting at the dawn of the XVIIIth century, is that John Baptist de La Salle dared to state that the Brothers also take the place “of the pastors of the Church” (M.D. 61, 3 (5); M.R. 203, 3), the “ministry” (M.R. 195, 2) which they exercise stops short of the confessional, because it is the responsibility of the Brothers to “obtain a good confessor for them (for their pupils)”. You almost get the impression that the “ministry” of the “guidance of the souls” of the children overtakes the purely priestly ministry. There we have a very strong indication of the vocation of the lay-religious in the ministry of Christian education. In the interpretation of these texts, this ministry could include a spiritual accompaniment of young people who are no longer children. In truth, De La Salle sees no opposition between the ministry of the Brother and that of the priest, but rather that they are complementary. It is a ministry of evangelisation that prepares for the reception of the sacraments and the sharing in the community of the Church. The Brothers were to take the children to the parish regularly and to educate them in sharing in the life of the Christian community. At the beginning of the XVIIIth century, the participation of the school in the parish life was very much appreciated.

The affective and moral attitude of the Brother must show both fatherly and motherly traits if he wants his message and the values he wants to hand on, “to be transmitted”. The meditation on Saint Francis de Sales portrays this attitude: “If you have the discipline of a father, towards them to withdraw them and alienate them from disorder, you must also have the tenderness of a mother, to gather them in and do them as much good as you can” (M.F. 101, 3). In the “Meditations

for feastsdays”, this meditation inspires a series of reflections on the conditions and the reality of the awakening of spiritual life. About Saint Joachim, De La Salle wrote: “If this saint was chosen to be the father of the Most Blessed Virgin, you are destined by God to give life to children in Jesus Christ, and even to produce and bring Jesus Christ himself to life in their hearts. Can it be said that you entered into that in God’s designs for you?” (6). (M.F. 157, 2). God’s choice and “designs”, therefore, precede this mysterious fecundity, but require a docility and fidelity to prayer, as well as a renunciation of the satisfactions of affectivity, however legitimate (M.F. 157, 2,3). That is how Saint John Baptist De La Salle places apostolic fecundity alongside an authentic consecration. In other words, it does not occur without renunciation. This is also the topic of the meditation on Saint Monica. “This holy mother suffered far more in bringing him (Saint Augustine) to birth in the spirit than she ever had in bringing him into the world. She never ceased praying for his conversion... Is this how carefully you act, to give to God those who have been confided to you, when you see them drifting towards dissoluteness?” (M.F. 122, 3). In his writings, De La Salle insists on a sort of concern bordering on feverishness, to give young people the life of Jesus Christ, to make them children of God. Spiritual fatherhood, as it can be understood in the Lasallian writings, is neither a simple direction of conscience, nor the relationship between a “wise master” and his disciple. Nor is it simply a relationship of a social nature, no matter how noble, in which the Brother compensates for any family and social deficiencies, which would allow the young person to aspire to a greater dignity. It requires a total consecrated commitment for the real life of another, which is for his growth in Christianity. In the seventh meditation for the time of retreat, the analogy of “work” completes that of “giving life”: “Saint Paul says quite strongly that those to whom he has announced the Gospel are his work, and that he has

brought them to life in Jesus Christ. Without comparing yourself to this great saint, you can say (in the proportion that there is between your work and his) you do the same thing, and that you exercise the same ministry in your profession” (M.R. 199, 1). The work of the Brother goes hand in hand with the gift of spiritual life to children. He leaves a clear imprint in the personality of those he educates. Everything relates to the ministry exercised by the Brother and which implies creating, forming something else in the other person. “Spiritual fatherhood” in this guise implies a contact which is one of “action” at the same time as it is one of transmitting life. •

(1) RAHARILALAO H., HOURS A., 1996, Ministère, Ministre, Thèmes lasalliens, III, Brothers of the Christian Schools, Rome, 205-220, p206.

(2) SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE, Meditations for the principal feasts of the year. Cahiers lasalliens n° 12, anastatic reproduction of the original edition of (?) 1730, Brothers of the Christian Schools, Rome, 1962.

(3) SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE, Meditations for the time of retreat. Cahiers lasalliens n° 13, anastatic reproduction of the original edition of (?) 1730, Brothers of the Christian Schools, Rome, 1963.

(4) ANATRELLA T., 1998, Christian Family, n° 1066, p. 7.

(5) SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE, Meditations for all the Sundays of the year. Cahiers lasalliens n° 12, anastatic reproduction of the original edition of (?) 1730, Brothers of the Christian Schools, Rome, 1962.

(6) The same reasoning is followed for the meditation on Saint Anne: “As old Anna gave birth to Samuel through her prayers, so Saint Anne gave birth to the Most Blessed Virgin by her earnestness in mental prayer. God, who has chosen you to learn to know him, also wants you to produce, so to speak, the Most Blessed Virgin his mother in the hearts of those whom you instruct” (M.F. 146, 2).