

## La Salle's Church of the Poor (1/2)

**Brother Gregory Wright**

In the Catholic Church of the late twentieth century, perhaps some of the best remembered, most frequently stressed, and most often quoted ideas are those found in the *Puebla Document*. Among them are the following:

The Lord's mandate is to preach the gospel to the poor. We must therefore distribute our apostolic personnel and efforts so as to give a preference to the poorest and neediest, and to those who are segregated for any reason... (9)

The poor merit preferential attention, whatever may be the moral or personal situation in which they find themselves. Made in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:26-28) to be his children, this image is dimmed and even defiled. That is why God takes on their defense and loves them (Mt 5:45; Jas 2:5) ... That is why the poor are the first ones to whom Jesus's mission is directed (Lk 4:18-21), and why the evangelization of the poor is the supreme sign and proof of his mission (Lk 4:21-23). (1142)

... the evangelical commitment of the Church, like that of Christ, should be a commitment to those most in need (Lk 4:18-21) ... (1141)

... service to the poor is the privileged, though not the exclusive, gauge of our following of Christ... (1145)

The poverty mentioned above, it says, «takes on very concrete faces in real life.» (31) Mentioned quite specifically are:

– the faces of young people, who are disoriented because they cannot find their place in society, and who are frustrated, particularly in marginal ... urban areas, by the lack of opportunity to obtain training and work; (33)

– the faces of marginalized and overcrowded urban dwellers, whose lack of material goods is matched by the ostentatious display of wealth by other segments of society; (38)

One of the remedies it seems to suggest for this situation is education, when for instance it asserts:

Authentic communion and participation can exist in this life only if they are projected on to the very concrete plane of temporal realities, so that mastery, use, and transformation of the goods of this earth and those of culture, science, and technology find embodiment in humanity's just and fraternal lordship over the world ... (327)

To be effective, this education requires a certain frame of mind on the part of those providing it. For the «... Christian message ... will ... be lived by those who ... dedicate themselves to serving others in a realistic way in today's world ...» (339) However, it also requires more than just seeing some things in a different way, but also «... to heighten our awareness of the obligation to have solidarity

with the poor, ... This means that we shall make their problems and struggles our own, ...» (10)

At this point, however, it should come as no surprise if someone who is familiar with the writings and ideas of St. John Baptist de La Salle says all this is nothing new, and I have heard it all before. And the justification for such a statement is that long before «preferential option for the poor» became such a popular idea and a catchword, the Founder had both expressed this idea and developed it in significant detail. He exerted great effort to make his disciples aware of «the church of the poor,» their obligations towards its members, and how alone they could be effective apostles of the poor. Among other of his writings, the *Common Rules* and his different series of meditations express these ideas very clearly and most emphatically.

Well before the *Puebla Document* appeared, La Salle perceived that poverty, particularly that experienced by the urban poor of the «Splendid Century,» took on some «very concrete faces in real life.» (31, 33, 38) Forced by their poverty to work for a living in whatever way they could, during the day the fathers and mothers of poor children abandoned their offspring «to live on their own, roaming all over as if they have no home.» (M: 193,2, 194,1) As a result these parents neglected «One of the main duties of fathers and mothers ...,» which is «to bring up their children in a Christian manner and to teach them their religion... » (M: 193:2) At least two additional reasons contributed to the failure of these parents regarding this important obligation. Usually they themselves lacked instruction and were not sufficiently enlightened about their religion or the basic school subjects. So they could not instruct their children even if they desired to do so. At the same time they did not have the money needed to pay teachers to do this task in their place. (CR: I, 5, 6; M: 193, 2, 194,1) So the parents' ignorance, born of poverty, in turn bred their children's ignorance, which led to the continuing poverty of their offspring.

Whatever its roots and causes might have been, the results of this situation were appalling and had long lasting effects. On the natural level, having become «accustomed to an idle life for many years,» these youths «have great difficulty when it comes time for them to go to work.» (M: 194,1) In addition, being illiterate and lacking any work skills, often it was impossible for these young people to rise from their poverty by acquiring employment through which they could earn an honest and decent living — if they really desired to do so. On the supernatural level the results could be even more devastating. Quite frequently, while on their own on the streets and lacking any supervision, these youths associated with bad companions. These led them astray, causing them to acquire many bad habits and to commit numerous sins. (M: 194,1) Later in life they would find it difficult, if not impossible, to overcome «... the bad habits ... contracted over so long a period of time. Even »frequent instructions or the use of the Sacraments" might not be able to help them effect a conversion in later life. (M: 194,1; CR: I,6) At best, achieving any success in this life as well as their eternal salvation would be very difficult for these victims of poverty.

Despite the dire situation, whether from a natural or a supernatural perspective, in which these children found themselves, as well as their poor prospects both in this world and in the next, as was said in the *Puebla Document*, «God ... loves them.» (1142) La Salle had asserted the same thing long before, reminding his disciples that these children were so dear to God that He destined them for salvation so that they could be united with Him in Heaven for all eternity. (M: 173,1, 193,3) Therefore he called on the Brothers «to recognize Jesus beneath the rags of the poor children whom you have to teach. Adore him in their person ... . honor the poor ... » (M: 96,3. Also see 133,3, 173,1) Likewise he described these children as «living images of Jesus Christ our Divine Master,» (M: 80,3) whom the Brothers should

prefer to those who are 'better off in any way. (M: 133,3) Finally, he added that faith alone could make it possible for his disciples to «look upon the poor as the wealth of the Church ... all that is richest and best in the Church, as bearing a closer resemblance to Christ.» The Brothers, he said, were to seek to develop such a faith, asking it from God as a gift most necessary for them in their work. (M 154, 1)

As was stated later in the Puebla Document, according to La Salle God's love is efficacious and active, finding and taking the means to show itself in practice. (M: 194,1) One way of doing this, both said, was preaching the Gospel to the poor. (PD: 9; M: 96,3; 133,3; 166,2; 189,1) Both described this task as the main mission Jesus entrusted to his Church, and La Salle said it is the principal apostolate of the Brothers. Returning to a point the Founder emphasized previously, the religious instruction of their children is one of the most important tasks of Christian fathers and mothers. However, as he also said, for a variety of reasons often parents can or will not give their children this advantage. So then God's efficacious love and his desire for the salvation of these children led him to call the Brothers to do this work. (M: 193,2,3; CR: I,5) And when his disciples fulfill this basic command of Jesus, these children are given the opportunity and the means to overcome some of the more serious obstacles to their salvation so as to enjoy the possibility of being united with God here as well as hereafter. (M 193,2; CR: I,5,6) Obstacles might exist to realizing God's plans for the poor, but his love will not allow these plans to be thwarted.

This mission of the Church and the Brothers is not only described as their priority task. For La Salle also had this to say about it:

It is your duty daily to instruct the poor ... in this follow the example of our divine Lord. Prefer the poor ... , for ... Our Saviour did not say the gospel is preached to the rich but «the poor have the gospel preached to them.» ... It was they who ordinarily followed Jesus, and who showed themselves more disposed to receive his doctrine, for in them it encountered fewer obstacles. (M: 166,2; see also 173,1)

Thus, long before it was set down in the Puebla Document (142), the Founder stated his version of the «preferential option for the poor.»

Today, more and more the following of Christ is seen as the essence of both the Christian life as well as the religious state. However, if opinions vary as to how best to do this, few would dispute this assertion of the Puebla Document, «... service to the poor is the privileged, though not the exclusive gauge of our following of Christ... » (1145) For his part, La Salle made this same point by citing for his disciples the example of saints such as Francis of Assisi and Cyprian whom he presented as models of this service. Regarding the former, he wrote:

St. Francis had ... an extraordinary love for the poor... . He could not refuse any who appealed to him, because he saw Jesus Christ in the person of the indigent, and because he was persuaded that when he assisted them it was Jesus Christ himself he helped, ... likewise his love for the poor ... led him to teach them in preference to the rich, ...

... St. Francis waited upon the poor ... that he might further imitate Jesus Christ, who loved the company of the poor, the Saint showed special happiness in their midst. (M: 173,1) As regards Cyprian he asserted:

... He showed an admirable zeal for the instruction of his flock, and he was particularly devoted to the poor.

When we have voluntarily embraced poverty to imitate Jesus Christ, we love as he did those whom God has allowed to be poor. (M: 166,2)

Also, in various places he admonished the Brothers to see

their vocation as a call to serve God just as Francis, Cyprian, Dominic and other of the saints had done. (M: 193,3) And when responding to this call, they were to remember that «Our Lord will look upon what you do for the poor as done to himself.» Thus motivated, they will be able «to overcome the promptings of nature when they suggest that you should show more consideration for the rich than for the poor.» (M: 150,1) By expressing himself thus, among other things the Founder stated very emphatically that our «preferential option for the poor» should go beyond feeling to action.

Likewise, La Salle anticipated what the Puebla Document would say by asserting that education is a means of serving the poor since it helps them to rise above the poverty in which they find themselves. Although stated in simpler terms, his goal also was

... that the mastery, use and transformation of the goods of this earth and those of culture, science, and technology find embodiment in humanity's just and fraternal lordship over the world... (PD 327)

And perhaps this echoes what he proposed as his basic educational objectives:

Your mission requires you to labor for the good of the Church and that of your country. Your pupils are already members of the State, and will soon be endowed with full citizenship. You will work on behalf of the Church by making them true Christians, submissive to the teachings of their faith and to the truths of the gospel. You will contribute to the good of your country by teaching them to read and write and all that pertains to your functions ... (M: 160, 3)

The religious aspects of this educational activity were also given an important place in the process when he insisted:

... the Brothers ... shall strive by prayer, instruction, and by their vigilance and good conduct in school, to procure the salvation of the children confided to their care, bringing them up in piety and in a truly Christian Spirit, that is according to the rules and the maxims of the Gospel. (CR: II,10)

Here two specific objectives seem to have been uppermost in the Founder's thinking. First, religious instruction was most necessary if these children were to live according to the gospel (CR: I,4) since only thus was it possible to make available to them «the means of salvation appropriate to their development.» (M: 193,3) Second, great priority was to be given to helping these poor boys «to preserve their innocence,» or to live according to God and in a manner pleasing to him. (M: 80,3; CR: II,9)

However, the «suitable education» envisioned by La Salle was not to confine itself to religious instruction with a view to helping poor boys lead a Christian life. At the same time the students were to be given an opportunity to achieve a basic literacy by learning to read and write. (M: 160,3; 194,1) Regarding this matter, the Founder's practical point of view is well stated in *The Conduct of the Schools*. For here he said that parents who denied their sons an education or unnecessarily cut it short should be reminded of

... the wrong that they do them in not making them learn to read and write, and how much they can harm them, as for lack of this knowledge they will never be capable of any employment ... (198)

He also makes this same point a second time when again he speaks about this failure on the part of some parents,

... It should be represented to them of what importance it is to an artisan to know how to read and write well, since, however little intelligent he may be, if he knows how to read and write he is capable of anything. (199)

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