

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

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In some ways La Salle showed himself well in advance of his times when he perceived the close connection between the poverty which deprived people of economic opportunity and their inability to lend a Christian life. Here very definitely he was dealing with «the very concrete plane of temporal realities, ... » while calling for and seeking «a just and fraternal lordship over the world ...» (PD: 327) Well before such an approach became widely accepted, he was seeking the abolition of poverty through an effective service of the poor.

Next, after reminding his disciples that «Your mission requires you to labor for the good of the Church and that of your country,» and telling them how they could do so, La Salle also made another interesting point. For he concluded by saying, «But you must join prayer to your exterior efforts, for failing this, your action will have little effect.» (M: 160,3) Thus again, well in advance, he expressed an idea later stressed in the Puebla Document, that the «... Christian message ... will be lived by those who dedicate themselves to serving others in a realistic way in today's world ...» (339) And love of poverty, the Founder said, is an essential part of that message. For by inviting only poor shepherds, not the rich and powerful of the world, to visit him at his birth, Jesus shows with whom he does and does not wish to associate. (M: 86,2) He does not want anything to do with those who «judge merely by external appearances,» and value only «what strikes the eye.» For as was shown at the time of his birth, such people have no place for him in their lives and hearts. (M: 85'1) Rather he seeks the company of those who, like the Magi, «recognize Jesus beneath the rags of poor children ...» and can «adore him in their person.» (M: 96,3)

Always seeking to be practical, La Salle suggested how his Brothers can become persons with whom Jesus is willing to associate. One way, he said, is to imitate the lives and actions of saints such as Paulinus of Nola, Lawrence, Ambrose, and Cajetan — to name but a few. These he portrayed as joining a great love for poverty and poor people to a detachment from worldly goods that at times seemed to go to extremes. (M: 81,1; 137,2; 153,3; 154,1) This love, he added, would lead them to show great esteem and a deep concern for the poor with whom they worked. (M: 143,2) Then also would they be able effectively to encourage their poor students not to set their hearts on riches, but to have a love for poverty" since they themselves gave the example in this matter. (M: 202,2)

However, the Founder said his disciples could not stop with just having a great affection for poverty. Anticipating the *Puebla Document*, he insisted that «more than a change of outlook» was required, also it was necessary «to have solidarity with the poor ... » (10) And this was a point to which the Founder returned on numerous occasions.

Particularly in his meditations for the Vigil of the Nativity and the Nativity of Our Lord did La Salle stress and develop the idea of practicing poverty in imitation of Jesus and in union with him. Very clearly and most explicitly did he show the effects of poverty on the life of Jesus. Then he called on the Brothers to imitate Jesus in his practice of this virtue by accepting as he had the sufferings, inconveniences, and humiliations that are always the lot of the poor. (85,1; 86,1,2) But not only here did he express these ideas. Throughout the year, in the meditations he composed for the feasts of various saints, he signaled out their detachment from earthly goods, love of poverty, and frequently heroic practice of this virtue. Among others, Anthony (97,1), Ambrose (81,1), Francis of Assist (173,2), Bonaventure (142,1), Cajetan (153,3), Charles Borromeo (187,1), Peter of Alcantara (179,1), and Francis Borgia (176,2) were presented to the Brothers as models of this virtue. Very definitely, then, these examples show the importance La Salle placed on really living a life of poverty and not just having a high esteem for this virtue.

Returning to the Founder's Christmas meditations, here he also stresses the practical importance of poverty for his disciples when he writes:

Nothing so attracts souls to God as the poverty and humility of those who try to lead them to him...

... as long as you have a sincere love for poverty and for all that is humiliating, you will produce fruit in souls; ... the angels of God will make you known and will inspire parents to send you their children to teach, that by your instructions you will touch the hearts of these poor boys, ... But if you do not resemble Christ at His birth ... you will be little known and little employed, you will be neither loved nor appreciated by the poor, and you will never be for them a saviour, ... for you can attract them to God- only in so far as you resemble Jesus at his birth. (M: 86,3)

Thus did he indicate why he thought «solidarity with the poor» was necessary for those who would instruct the poor, as well as the good results which it along could produce in their work. And this is why he challenged the Brothers to become poor in reality, not just in desire:

How long has Jesus been knocking at the door of your heart and been waiting to enter, and you have not wished to receive him? And why, if not because he comes to you, poor like a slave, a man of sorrows. (M: 85,1)

Evidently, then, the Founder had no doubts about why and how the teachers in his Christian schools were to show their «preferential option for the poor.» For not just in the two Christmas meditations, but in other places as well he stated his position on this subject clearly and plainly. For instance, in the *Common Rules* we read:

The necessity of this Institute is very great because the working class and the poor being usually little instructed, and being occupied all day in gaining a livelihood for themselves and their families, cannot give their children the needed instruction or a suitable Christian education. It was to procure this advantage for the children of the working class and of the poor, that the Christian Schools were established. (I.5)

And he made it very plain to his disciples that they had committed themselves to this task in response to a call God had given them. Therefore, on a number of occasions he asserted that they had to live up to their commitment and be prepared to give an account of their stewardship in this matter (Lk 16:2). (M: 206,1) To begin with:

Since the Brothers spend the greater part of their day in school, ... they cannot be too watchful over themselves while ... there, in order not to lose the merit ... from their labors ... and in order not to fail in any of their obligations. (M: 92,3)

Also, he insisted they must be careful not to lose or waste their time, which is not theirs to dispose of, but to use it well as faithful servants of God. (M: 92,3) An important way of making good use of their time, he added, is always to be a source of edification to their students by being models «of the virtues which you wish them to practice.» (M: 91:3) Equally important is making good use of all the time allotted to teach the students and teaching them well. And to begin with, they were to look on the teaching of the Christian faith as their chief duty. All the time set aside for this task should be devoted to teaching religion, doing it both well and effectively. (M: 91,3; 92,3) Still doing this should not be at the expense of teaching the other subjects such as reading and writing. For the Brother also has an obligation to do this work as well as he possibly can. (M: 91,3) Finally, while doing all these things, the Founder called on his disciples to have an equal concern for all their students. In practice they should devote themselves as much to the «poor» — those who are slow learners and create problems, as well as the «rich» — those who are docile and agreeable and do well in their lessons. (M: 206,1) In brief, he said that a Christian teacher, dedicated to helping the poor, should take note of many things while doing his work. For such an individual would have to render an account to God of how he did this important but difficult task of the Church.

At the same time, though, La Salle also called attention to yet other facets of this apostolate. Important as this work is for God and the Church, few recognize and appreciate its place in the plan of salvation. In fact, he says, it «is esteemed and honored only by those who have a truly Christian spirit.» (M: 113,1) whom he implies are relatively few in number. Others, even when they call themselves Christians, often look down on this work. So those who do this task can find themselves exposed to humiliations, insults, outrages, and calumnies on the part of such people. (M: 113,1; 120,1) It is not impossible, the Founder added, that teachers might share the experience of St. Cassian, their patron. For at times'persecution and even martyrdom will be the only reward of those who undertake this apostolate. (M: 155,3) So here the Founder seemed to call on the Christian teacher to expect and prepare for the worst when he devotes himself to helping the poor.

However, La Salle did not stress only the negative aspects of the situation. Thus he reminds the Brothers that there is «... reward which God will give you in advance in this life ...» if you do this good and necessary work. For if those who live and work in «solidarity with the poor» do their work well, they can be a source of «a great abundance of grace ...» for the ones they instruct. For they will see that both while in school and later on their students live «honorable lives,» persevering in the faith and living as good Christians. On seeing this, these teachers will realize how — under God — they have helped bring it about. As well as the humiliations, outrages, and persecutions they might endure, Christian teachers will experience this satisfaction as part of their reward — even in this life. (M: 207,3) In all this La Salle takes a very optimistic view. Since through its «preferential option for the poor,» he insists that «the Church of the Poor» can help the victims of injustice overcome the real and serious disadvantages of their situation. And by this means it will produce good results, in the present life as well as in the life to come.

It is doubtful if any age has been so fortunate as not to recognize how appropriate is one of the best remembered statements of Jesus, «The poor you always have with you,...» (Jh 12:8) Modern historians of seventeenth century France tend to support the description of the poor and their living conditions as set down or implied by La Salle in his writings. (Lewis: 62-79, 171-176; Mongredien: 185-245) Still, in spite of all our scientific and material progress, it is

not impossible that today a larger proportion of the world's population lives in poverty and endures its consequences than did in the Age of Louis XIV. So the challenge addressed to La Salle's disciples, «... to give a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor, ...» (Rule: 1,3) might be more difficult to respond to than ever, even in spite of their best efforts in this area.

At the same time, though, in affluent societies, in addition to those' deprived of material goods, often there are young people who are «poor» in other ways. In spite of possessing an abundance of material things — and maybe because of this, they feel empty and dissatisfied. Rightly or wrongly, at times they feel unloved and rejected by parents and family who provide for them materially while ignoring their other and more important needs. They too form part of the «Church of the Poor» for their situation might be the most desperate of all in view of the substance abuse in which they engage and, at times, their shockingly high suicide rate. They also need to experience the «preferential option for the poor» required of the Church and its ministers, particularly those engaged in educational apostolates. In attempting to give them «a human and Christian education,» the first challenge might be to establish «solidarity with the poor» in their special situation — like Blain describes the Founder doing with the prisoners confined at St. Yon.

Called as they are today by the Church, as well as their Founder, to a «preferential option for the poor,» certainly Lasallian educators cannot ignore the numerous victims of social injustice they encounter in so many different situations. Moreover, neither can these Lasallians neglect making their students who have adequate worldly goods and the advantages these provide the poor around them as well as how they should respond more aware of to this situation. But at the same time, his disciples should be ready to respond to the different needs of the «affluent poor» of modern society, when they encounter them, and if they are called on to help meet their educational needs. For isn't it by striving to alleviate these and all the other different forms of poverty that modern Lasallians will show their «preferential option for the poor» while responding to «the signs of the times?» •

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