

**The Life Program
of John Baptist de La Salle (1/2)**

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The two articles which follow are the conclusion which the author has included in his book, entitled "Roots of our identity" (Lasallian Vocational Center, Valladolid, 1998, pages 241-247). We are publishing these reflections in Lasalliana because of the potential they offer to become more familiar with the personality of the Founder.

We have a document from John Baptist de La Salle handed down by his biographer Blain: "**The Rules which I have imposed upon myself**". Written in successive editions, when the author was between the ages of 35 and 40, it shows us the broad strokes of the critical program of an individual who was in the midst of the maturing process.

As we begin analyzing the text we are immediately faced with a certain problem: the trappings typical of the spirituality of the 17th century, characterized by counting acts, rigidity in relationships, a pessimistic concept of human nature...

On the other hand, the 20 points or "rules" that make up this document do not follow any apparent order. De La Salle keeps adding one after another, without distinguishing the role played by those which referred to the great orientations of his life from those which seemed to be simple or practical concrete measures.

The formal concept that we have today of the "personal program" did not exist back then. If we can overcome these external difficulties we will be able to get an **in-depth look of the Lasallian religious experience**. We will try to identify the basic tenets - or **dynamics** - of that which, without calling it such, was John Baptist de La Salle's life plan. We will discover the **attitudes** which he tried to foster based on those dynamics. And finally, we will see how all of that fitted into the **reality** in which he lived until it took

shape as a series of **practices** which were very dependent upon the culture and customs of his time.

1. OVERVIEW: UNITY OF LIFE

The first thing that calls our attention is the **unifying tendency** which continued to be refined and to grow in De La Salle's religious experience during the most intense years of the structuring and the growth of the Society: "*It is a good rule of conduct to make no distinction between the matters proper to our state and those which refer to our salvation and perfection. We can be certain that we can work out our salvation and acquire perfection in no better way than by performing the duties of our charge, provided that we accomplish them in view of the will of God. We must try to keep this rule always in mind*" (number 3).

This vital unity is achieved, as we shall soon see, largely around the experiences which are shaping his life: all that concerns **the work of the schools** and the directing of the teachers; and *founded on the experiences in which his life is founded*: his relationship with God, his **spirit of faith**. He has tuned into the work of the schools as a mission received from God. In fact, he had already abandoned the distinction of being a canon in order to totally devote himself to the new project. His entire existence will center around the crystallization of the community program of the schools. **And it is precisely there where he finds God.**

2. THE THREE CENTRAL IDEAS OR DYNAMICS

Three dynamics or axes direct his entire life program. His entire existence, his daily tasks and his interpersonal relationships are all guided and directed by these focal points.

1. God's Work : the center of attention.

"*God's Work*", to which De La Salle refers so many times in his spiritual writings, is like the hidden treasure for which he sold his entire house and to which he devotes all his energy. The portion of land which the Lord has entrusted to him in his Work corresponds to "*the establishment and guide*" of the community for schools in service of the poor. From here it follows that "*there should be no distinction made...*": his personal history is founded on the History of Salvation. In everything that happens, in lived relationships, in the personal itinerary that is intermingled with that of others **in communion for mission**, he recognizes that it is God who saves, it is God who fulfills his Work; therefore *he abandons himself into God's hands*: "*I shall always look upon the work of my salvation and the foundation and government of our community as the work of God. Therefore, I will abandon the care of both to him in*

order to act only by his orders. I will consult him frequently regarding all I must do for the one or for the other. Often I will say to him the words of the prophet Habacuc: Domine, opus tuum: Lord, this is your work” (Number 8).

2. Union with Christ: the point of view.

Union with Christ, identification with Him, is the perspective from which he contemplates life and the work entrusted to him. It is not an external imitation that he searches for, but internal union “with his views and intentions”:

“I will unite all my actions to those of Our Lord at least twenty times a day and try to conform my views and intentions to his” (Number 5).

The Christocentrism that John Baptist lives out in such an unambiguous way, a fundamental dimension of Lasallian spirituality, is in the very essence of *the ministry of the Christian educator*, according to what De La Salle will write later in his Meditations: the educator acts as a *representative* of Christ, as his *ambassador*, he should instill the spirit of Jesus Christ and therefore he must himself put on Jesus Christ.

3. The force of the Spirit: guarantee of authenticity.

This third dynamic remains in the background like a thread that runs through and strings together the entire life plan. It sets up the guarantee that God’s work is really being done. Without this reference point there would always be the doubt that perhaps it is just the whim of someone who is doing this work. It is a sort of clarifying force that makes the consciousness of being God’s **mediator, instrument, minister and representative** spring forth in the work: *“I will continually seek guidance about that which I should do”:*

“When my Brothers come to me for advice, I will ask our Lord to give it to them. If it is an important matter, I will take a little while to pray about it, or at least be careful to keep myself recollected during this time, and to raise my heart briefly to God” (Number 6). “I will be careful to raise my heart to God whenever I start some activity. Whatever work I undertake, I will make sure I begin it only after having said a prayer” (Number 18).

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