

**ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE
AND MARIAN DEVOTION (2/2)**

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4. Characteristics of La Salle's devotion to Mary

I have spoken about the first section. In the second section, Blain showed the definite characteristics of the Marian devotion of our Holy Founder. For the most part they refer to facts which we have often been told. We can, therefore, be brief without inconveniencing our readers. Blain speaks of the practice of pilgrimages: Notre-Dame de Liesse. (He says nothing of the one to Aubervilliers in 1690; B1, 298). This confidence in Mary rests on her title of "treasurer of God's graces". La Salle put his heart and soul into making Mary honoured. Blain forgot the episode in which La Salle was in a church on Assumption day. He remonstrated with the preacher because he neglected to speak of Mary. Did Blain have this story in mind when he wrote: "*Sometimes he could not find strong enough words to rail against those who, by a rashness bordering on impiety, condemned this devotion*". To honour the Most Blessed Virgin, is to name her with respect by always (or nearly always) referring to her as the "most blessed", because she is worthy of it. It is also to celebrate all her feastdays with a particular devotion. More especially, it is to say the Rosary every day.

Blain stresses the use of the Rosary: La Salle was famed as the "priest of the rosary". In his schools he established the presence of two pupils, in turn, who would ensure the recitation of the rosary during the day. This practice was continued for only a few years after the death of the Founder. Blain also loved to state how often La Salle used to refer to himself proudly as the Servant of Mary. His devotion was warm and heartfelt: "Through the Most Blessed Virgin, he obtained abundant graces. He threw himself into Mary's arms on every occasion, as a child into the arms of its Mother. He never undertook an important matter without having recommended it to the Most Blessed Virgin. He finished every action of the day with a *Sub tuum praesidium*. After mental prayer and the rosary he had the *O Domina mea* recited", a prayer which he had learned in Saint Sulpice possibly.

We know that La Salle had the six-decade rosary recited, sometimes known as Saint Bridget's rosary and also the Crown of Our Lady. This Crown of Our Lady, ascribed to Saint John Capistrano, has a total of 63 Hail Marys intending to honour the supposed sixty-three years of Mary's life on earth. Our Founder explained a way of saying the Rosary (DB 4,13). We know the esteem he had for the litanies of Loretto, the Angelus, the angelic greeting, and the stanza *Maria Mater gratiae*, which he included in the evening prayer and which he was saying at the moment of his death: "*Tu nos ab hoste protégé, et mortis hora suscipe*".

La Salle crowned all these devotions by the practice of saying the Little Office of the Most Blessed Virgin. Peter Damien had popularised the recitation of this Little Office which the canons and monks added to the Great Office. La Salle kept it for his Novices, but, occasionally, the Brothers who remained behind on Sundays recited it together. Finally, we remember that the Founder gave a half-hour talk to the Brothers before supper on the feastdays of the Most Blessed Virgin.

This display of devotions, practices and prayers, is justified by a theological point of view of the strength of intercession that the Virgin Mary had. In his Treatise on Prayer, John Baptist de La Salle wrote: "*If it is useful (and fitting) to pray to all the saints, it is far more useful to address our prayers to the Most Blessed Virgin. She is the most perfect creature and the highest in glory, and has, therefore, great power with God, and by her intercession she can help us very much to reach salvation and in all our needs. She does not refuse help to those who ask her with sincere piety and with a heart free from all inclination to sin*" (DA 404,3,1).

This is a quite good picture of our Father's Marian devotion, according to the viewpoint of his first published biography.

5. Theocentric Marian doctrine

The aspect of John Baptist de La Salle's Marian devotion that I would like to stress, is its theocentrism and Christocentrism. The stumbling block that has always beset the homage due to the Virgin Mary is the one that would

make a quasi divinity of her. La Salle points out very strongly that the Virgin Mary remains a human being, even though she is the Mother of God. *“the Most Blessed Virgin is really and truly the mother of Jesus Christ, because she conceived him and brought him into the world. Having given birth to the body of Jesus Christ who is one with the person of the Son of God and who is also God, she is in effect the mother of the one who is God and man...”* (DA 104, 1,7).

I would love to quote in their entirety, all the Marian pages of John Baptist de La Salle, which would make a worthwhile anthology. For the moment I must content myself with quoting passages from John Baptist de La Salle dealing with the Birth of the Most Blessed Virgin. These, however, will give a good sample of the theocentrism of his Marian attachment. This is what the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools says:

“God who directs all things with wisdom, having planned to save mankind and to be born like them, chose a Virgin who was fit to be his temple and dwelling-place. To prepare her as he desired, the Holy Spirit adorned her with all the natural and supernatural qualities fitting for the Mother of a God. [...]” (MF 163.1)

“Let us admire the number of graces with which God adorned the soul of the Most Blessed Virgin at the moment of her birth. She was so filled with them that never have there been creatures like her, nor will there ever be. The Holy Spirit in bestowing on her the plenitude of his grace, showered her with his gifts and from that moment dwelt in her to prepare her to receive and hold the Son of God made man, in her womb. He even gave her a heart so full of the love of God that it beat only for God. Her whole being was dedicated to God. Her mind was concerned only with God and with what he showed her should be pleasing to her. All the faculties of her soul had no function other than to pay homage to God. Even her body served as an instrument for the holy actions which were at work in her and which helped to make her as spiritual as possible. It would be made a sacred sanctuary where Jesus Christ was to enter and offer himself interiorly to God as a spotless victim to complete the absolute purification of the soul of this holy Virgin that the Spirit of God had possessed since her birth. Oh, how happy was that day for Mary, and, indeed, for all mankind who find in her their refuge because of the fund of graces that God placed in her from the moment of her birth. [...] If Mary has received such an abundance of graces, it was to dispense them to those who had recourse to her. [...]” (MF 163.2,3.)

For John Baptist de La Salle, the Virgin Mary was, as for Saint Bernard, “dispensatrix of God’s graces”. There is no servile turning away from her own qualities. She refers to God all the good that is in her. *“Looking at herself and contemplating God in herself, and quite astonished to see the abundance of God in his creature, she was persuaded and even convinced that everything in her was there to honour God and to say continually with David that “even to her very bones she was so indebted to God that they could only cry: who is like to God?”* (MF 163,2,3.) It is an admirable reflection in which we find expressions of La Salle which are original and spiritually very rich: *“Mary contemplates God in herself”*, that is to say *“God acting in her”*. She is astonished to see *“the abundance of God in his creature”*. In this awareness of the special graces with which she had been favoured, Mary found it necessary to sing her Magnificat, and also to take up the cry of the psalmist: *“Who is like to God”* (Adonai mi kamo-cha?). Yes, who can be compared to this God of goodness who floods the human race with love by presenting it with his Son? In such a way the Virgin Mary, like the moon to which the mystics have compared her or with which they associated her, is like a luminous mirror which reminds us that the light radiating from her, has its source in the limitless Sun of Divine Love.

We must also look at the Christocentrism that springs from the numerous Marian prayers in the Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer. I could not end this article without suggesting one or two examples from it.

“You are the mother of my Creator and mine. You are my queen and my mistress. I honour you, respect you and love you, after God and your divine Son, above all else. I submit myself to your gentle empire in time and in eternity. O my loving mother who can stop himself from submitting to it since God himself was pleased to submit himself to your authority as your child. O, I submit with all my heart. I beg, most holy mother of God, to obtain from your very dear Son, the grace of living and dying in obedience to him and to you.” (EM 8,216, 2,3)

One of the most beautiful prayers of John Baptist de La Salle is addressed to the Child Jesus, cradled in his mother’s arms: *“I adore you in the arms of your holy mother as on the throne worthiest of your majesty after the womb of your heavenly Father. I fall at the foot of this throne of grace to render to your supreme majesty all the honour I am capable of. I recognise you as my God, my redeemer and saviour, who came to ransom me and deliver me from my sins”* (EM 8,215, 2). This prayer reminds us of the *“O Jesus living in Mary, come and live in me...”* of Bérulle who inspired Olier with it. It well expresses the Christocentrism of Marian devotion. John Baptist de La Salle’s Marian devotion, founded on theology, could not but be so. Mary is there, but it is Jesus who retains the first place, as is his due. •