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**LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY:
A CHRISTIAN WAY FORWARD**

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Brother Gilles Beaudet

**3. THE CHALLENGE
OF THE BEATITUDES**

Everything essential is stressed in the spirituality of the Christian put forward by Saint John Baptist de La Salle in the message of Jesus.

Above all it is not a message to be looked upon as an object of study but as a principle and model of a way of life. "He who loves me, keeps my commandment" (Jn 14,21). "You are my friends, if you do what I command you" (Jn 15, 14).

We could make do with these words of Jesus to be satisfied about observing the commandments. However, Jesus' commandments go further than the commandments of Moses: "You have heard that it was said... and I say to you..." (Matthew 6).

La Salle steers his disciple towards this new law. It is the law of love, and precisely because of that, it goes further. "The measure of love is to love without measure," said Saint Augustine.

The Christian lives by the principles of the Gospel. He judges human beings and things by the light of God; he weighs them, so to speak, in God's scales. In order to do that he must have the sayings of the Word of God, our criteria, engraved in his soul, in his mind and on his heart. We must often go back to the Word of God; read it often, meditate upon it, make it our own. *It is an important point in Lasallian spirituality.*

If we manage to live on this level, we will distinguish ourselves from the great mass of rationalists and selfish people who prefer their own view and their own choice to the view and the choice of God, which Jesus has taught us.

Our guide in the Christian way, our master in spirituality, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, also insists that the Christian should listen to the Beatitudes.

3.1. Discordant speech?

La Salle knew very well that a great number of people are fearful of the ideal of the Beatitudes.

He posed the question: "To how many others (Christians) do these words of Jesus seem hard: *Blessed are the poor in*

spirit?" (Med. 5.3). "Most Christians are more incredulous than Saint Thomas since they do not believe Jesus Christ. He said in the Gospel: "*Blessed are the poor, and they consider them unfortunate.*"

Jesus line of conduct is far removed from the easy ways that certain speechifiers put forward today. Jesus' way, however, guarantees to lead to eternal salvation. The way of the masters of error leads to alternative paradises which are soon emptied of their substance.

The discordant discourse is not Jesus' discourse, since the latter makes a perfect agreement between effect and cause. The discordant discourse is the one made by the false wise men of this world who are opposed to the irreplaceable teaching of Jesus.

3.2. Surer than any lottery.

La Salle wants to place his disciple in the school of Happiness. He invites him to follow closely this contract of happiness proposed by the Beatitudes.

In a little known text entitled: "Extract from the customs of the Christian schools", La Salle told his Brothers how to form Christians: "*You must explain the eight beatitudes to them so that they know how to distinguish those who are blessed from those who are unfortunate. You must make sure that the schoolchildren do not speak like those in the world, reprimanding them firmly when they do so, so that they remember it all their lives*" (AMG BP 804-807P).

So, the study of the Beatitudes shows us how to distinguish the recipes for happiness from those of wretchedness. Jesus was extremely clear in his language as a divine prophet. It is up to us to make our choice.

It is an apprenticeship. It is sometimes a conversion; a kind of deprogramming. The world has fashioned us. A worldly spirit lives in us and too often inspires us. How are we to learn to allow the Beatitudes to speak and then choose accordingly?

La Salle attaches such importance to Christian education through the Beatitudes that we find the same insistence in another manuscript (this one not signed either, unfortunately) which is even more explicit: "*The Brothers must teach their pupils to speak in a Christian way and not in the corrupt language of the wicked world which is cursed by God because it says and loves everything opposed to what God said, practised and taught in this world. That is why they will take care that their pupils do not speak in the way of the world, and, when they do so, will reprimand them firmly, making an impression on their mind which they will remember all their lives*" (AMG C 225 box 1). So it is the same insistence that the formation given at a young age should continue to inspire them all through their Christian lives.

Thus we have a good spirituality which contradicts the world, which detaches itself from the anti-Christian world. We are also confronted with the possibility of a wonderful misunderstanding! Yet isn't it Saint John's discourse: "*do not love the world and everything in it*" (1 Jn 2, 1 S)... or of Saint Paul: "*the wisdom of this world is folly...*" (1 Cor 3, 19). The world is not the earth. The world is not our neighbour. The "world" as mentioned here, is those opposed to Jesus Christ. Those who do not even live by the most elementary message of Jesus Christ. Those who do not want to know anything about Jesus or God; those are the ones we call the *world*.

We are rather ill at ease, because we rub shoulders with

these people; we are in the midst of this particular crowd that Jesus compared to “sheep without a shepherd”, poorly directed, and undernourished souls.

We run the risk of being infected by their moral illnesses. The apostle was well aware of the situation: his first converts were in a similar condition. Paul encouraged them by his own example: *“We are proud that our conscience assures us that our lives in this world, and especially our relations with you, have been ruled by God-given frankness and sincerity, by the power of God’s grace, and not by human wisdom”* (2 Cor 1 12). Resistance to infection is possible; but it won’t just happen. It will require effort; it will encounter obstacles.

This spiritual resistance has a good spiritual food as basis. This is what La Salle wants to offer to Christians. He takes it, of course, from the Word of God. Straightaway, he offers the living marrow of the Beatitudes.

3.3. The Beatitudes explained by Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

How did La Salle view the Beatitudes? Not as magisterial pronouncements engraved on ornate ceramics that we can admire without being touched by them. No, he sees the Beatitudes as “deeds and practices of virtue”. The Beatitudes are something to live by. They are real, which we must bring into our lives. La Salle qualifies these actions with two adjectives: *“very excellent and very perfect”*. It is astonishing to read this unusual pleonasm: can what is perfect be “very” perfect? This pleonasm, however, reveals the enthusiasm of the master whose usual logic is found to be faulty in this instance. La Salle certainly places the teaching of the Beatitudes at the pinnacle of the Gospel ideal.

Moreover, his enthusiasm can be explained by the results that we can hope for from the practice of the Beatitudes; they *“lead souls to the holiness and perfection of the Christian life”*.

So we are truly on the road of true spirituality, on a journey which leads to nothing less than holiness of the person and Christian perfection of life. This spirituality, recommended by our spiritual master Saint John Baptist de La Salle, was taught us by Jesus Christ. There are some excellent recommendations to make us interested in the Beatitudes.

These Beatitudes are “recipes” for happiness. It is the same word that we find in the Catechism of the catholic Church (N° 1717-1729). La Salle explains: *“In expounding them, Jesus Christ promised those who practised them happiness beginning in this life”* (Devoirs, p. 189). Christian life in its highest demands could therefore give a human being the happiness he strives for. This happiness has a purer quality than all the alternative forms of happiness put forward by the merchants of illusion.

Yet their merit does not stop there.

“The Beatitudes are a guarantee and an assurance of the consummate happiness enjoyed in heaven.” Happiness on earth, eternal happiness: such are the promises of the Beatitudes. Who then would not be willing to invest in such fruitful “capital”?

3.4. Eight beatitudes = eight choices of living!

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit (that is to say: of heart and affection), for the kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

“The poor in spirit are the humble who distrust themselves, and those who detach their hearts from affection for things of the earth, to attach them solely to God”.

That is the attitude that we must understand. That is the first choice in life that leads us to happiness: to choose God as our first love, as the supreme value. To know how to relativize material goods, to know how to do without them. Also to know how to distrust oneself. To guard against pride, against selfishness, against self-importance.

In a quite similar sense, recent translations give this passage: *“Happy are those who have the soul of a poor person”*. (The Gospels, Bellarmin, 1983). The explanation given by La Salle made us completely understand how a “soul of a poor person” lives.

His reward? *“The kingdom of heaven is theirs”*. Whoever attaches himself to God on earth already possesses it here below, and, as La Salle teaches, *“if he dies in that state, he will possess it for eternity”* (Devoirs, p. 190).

2. Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the land.

“These meek are the ones who are in such control of themselves that, far from becoming bitter when insults are poured on them, they are not even in the least resentful” (Devoirs, p. 191).

Outstanding, heroic, Christian meekness. A kind of “land of the strong” as is said of silence. The supreme example is given us by Jesus himself during his trial: accused, he did not say a word. When he was struck, he did not reply. Are we not in the situation outlined by Jesus when he said: *“If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, offer him the left one.”*? Demands that we are fearful of taking for real and which make us shudder.

Why does Jesus insist so much on meekness? *“Learn of me for I am meek...”* *“You have heard that it was said: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But now I tell you: do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you...”* (Matt 5, 38,39).

The reward? *“They will possess the earth”*. La Salle makes this comment: *“By this conduct, we easily become masters of the world”. You would have thought the opposite. You would think that tyrants would possess the earth, that they would subject it. That the violent, the maffiosi, the criminals would possess the earth. They do not possess it; they violate it. They steal it. True conquest is made by meekness. “Through it we control our passions and stop them running away... Those who are born with this happy disposition (meekness) or who have acquired it with the help of grace, become in a sense masters of others and manage them as they please”* (Med. 65.2).

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