

**LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY  
A CHRISTIAN JOURNEY  
— VII —**

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**4. THE (LASALLIAN) CHRISTIAN  
IS A TRUE SON OF THE CHURCH**

**4.1. An ecclesiology typical of its time**

For De La Salle, attachment to the Church is fundamental. To see the depths of his convictions, it is enough to consult his Catechism or the articles of his Duties of a Christian to God.

This should not make us apprehensive, however. Modern ecclesiology is different in some ways from De La Salle's: we can hardly blame him for that. De La Salle's life as a Christian was lived at a time which was strongly influenced by the clear-cut teachings of the Council of Trent. We, on the other hand, try to live our lives in the light of the aggiornamento of Vatican II. The difference in approach is not so great as one might be led to believe.

As the books tells us, the Council of Trent divided the Church up into three categories: the first, still on earth, was the Church militant; the second, being purified after death, was the Church suffering; the third, in glory in heaven, was the Church triumphant. This way of seeing things gave the (false) impression that these categories were quite separate. This did not prevent us, however, from knowing there was a communion of saints: we prayed for the souls in purgatory and asked them to intercede for us; and we had no problem about praying to the saints in heaven and asking them to intercede for the Church militant.

It may be simply a feeling, but one gets the impression nowadays that, at least in some parts of the world, there are more militants against the Church than militants in and for the Church. But the militants (1) have not all disappeared. There are still some left and some very active ones. Recent articles by Patrice de Plunkett (2) and others give very solid reasons why John Paul II was right to proclaim "The Splendour of the Truth" even to people not inclined to listen.

Despite the fact that certain Christians are irritated by the categories that were once used, there is still only one Church. These categories were used simply to distinguish between the major differences between Christians who were

alive and those who were dead. It was a way of drawing attention to the universality of the Church. It was not an idea thought up by some expert, but one based on Holy Scripture, even if we make allowances for some over-convenient interpretations.

What really matters is the life of the Church, the universal family of those who believe in Christ, who are baptised and united by faith and charity with the authority of the Vicar of Jesus Christ. De La Salle did not hesitate to define, as was the custom in those days, at which point a person ceased to be a true son of the Church. "Grapes don't grow on fig trees".

Regarding one's relationship with the Church, one can be a heretic, a schismatic, or be excommunicated (3).

A heretic is a person who has been baptised but who does not believe in all the articles of faith the Church tells us to believe.

A schismatic is a person who has been baptised but who does not recognise the authority and teachings of the Pope and lawful pastors, the true pastors of the Church.

An excommunicated person is one who has left the Church because of conduct or a sin condemned by the Church, or who has been unfaithful to the Church or has rebelled against it.

There are also people who have never belonged to the Church because they have remained pagans, idol worshippers or lacked information.

But since a bad son remains a son, it is the same for a Catholic Christian who, even in a state of mortal sin, remains united to Jesus Christ by a visible and external link (De La Salle's Catechism, CL 21, p.58).

De La Salle explains how this possible. The Christian in question professes, at least exteriorly, the doctrine taught by Jesus Christ, he frequents the sacraments, he shares in the prayers and merits of the saints in heaven, and of all the Christians on earth; he accepts the authority of the Holy Father the Pope and of the other pastors of the Church. The pilgrim Church is made up of these people "on the move". Their steps are hesitant, they stumble over obstacles, they wander off the right road, but can always get back to it. The lost sheep can return to the fold and continue their search for the true shepherd in the true fold.

However, the exterior link between the sinner and the Church, however tolerable it may be, is not what Jesus Christ wants. "In order to be pleasing to God, the Christian must be united interiorly with Jesus Christ, by living by his grace" (Catechism, p.59).

**4.2. The nature of the Church**

From whom did the Church receive its mandate? The word "mandate" was not used by De La Salle: reflecting his times, he used the word "power". It is the same thing. When someone has a mandate, he has also the possibility of acting on it: some call this power. This word can lead to misunderstanding: although it expresses the idea of "ability to do", some immediately, and often mistakenly, take it to mean domination (which is easily understood as oppression). De La Salle poses this same question:

“How do we know that Jesus Christ has given his power and authority to the Church?”. He replies: “Jesus Christ himself tells us when he says: “If he refuses to listen to the community, treat him like a pagan or a tax collector” (Mt 18,17) (4). For the Jew, the pagan is a goy (goyim are not well thought of by the Jews). Jews do not think much of tax collectors, either. Of course, the word “Church” used here (by De La Salle) means primarily the community, which is almost equivalent to the synagogue. But first of all it is the community founded by Jesus Christ and which is gathered in his name for the purpose of his Kingdom. “I know my own and my own know me” (Jn 10,14).

### 4.3. The true Church

#### “one flock and one shepherd” (Jn 10,16).

For De La Salle, the marks of the true Church are very important. The Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. In his Catechism, he adds a fifth mark: Roman. De La Salle asks: “Why is the Church called Roman?” He replies: “It is to distinguish it from heretical societies (those of Luther, Calvin, Rutherford, etc.) which call themselves churches; and also because the Pope, who is the Bishop of Rome, is the visible head of the Church”.

De La Salle does not have many doubts about the Church: he tends not to mince his words when speaking of it. While not actually belligerent, he is not afraid of hoisting his colours and letting people know who he is. The biographer who knew him best does not hesitate to write the following: “It often happened that he was drawn into conversations about current affairs and asked his opinion, and that people tried to win him over. When this happened, he felt obliged to speak and proclaim the truth, and he did so with such ardour that no one could doubt or suspect his orthodoxy, or hope to win his support” (5). When someone dared to include the name of De La Salle (it was actually his brother) in a list of people who were opposed to Rome, the Founder “could not remain silent...He spoke out, and speaking with all the fervour and reasoned argument that even the most

zealous Catholics could possibly hope for, he refuted the calumny with an answer worthy of himself”. He sent a Brother a letter of protest which he wished to be made public. It was an extraordinary stand to take and it should not be forgotten (6). All the same, De La Salle was able to discuss with schismatics, heretics, excommunicated people and those under interdict. He tried to help them become aware of the error of their ways. There are many examples of this in his life as described by Canon Blain, his biographer. •

(1) The word “militant” in a modern context tends to have political or ideological connotations. Although it was used quite successfully by Catholic action groups, the expression “the Church militant” was replaced by the “pilgrim Church”, doubtlessly in deference to modern day Christian sensibilities. How many Christians, however, if asked point blank, could say in what way they belonged to the pilgrim Church, in what way they felt they were pilgrims? There’s probably room here for some catechesis...

(2) In Figaro Magazine, October 1993, Plunkett writes: “It is the nature of man to seek the truth. In the depths of his being there is a law which is independent of our whims, and a voice which we would hear if we lived inside ourselves. These are the ideas of John Paul II. He didn’t invent them: they’ve been around for 2,000 years”

(3) These categories of people are still part of the Church’s teaching. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, article 2089, speaks of incredulity, heresy, schism, apostasy, and in articles 1463, 2272, 2322, of excommunication.

(4) It is interesting to note that De La Salle makes the same observation in the Meditation on the Chair of St Peter at Antioch (Med. 106).

(5) Blain II, p.218. See also page 221

(6) See Blain II, p.224. De La Salle never hesitated to take sides openly in order to dispel any misunderstanding about his fidelity to Rome. These examples should be borne in mind while reading the article entitled “The Church”, (especially paragraph 2), in the Thèmes Lasalliens (Vol. I). Meditation 5,1 also is apposite: “There are some in fact...who pretend to be able to argue about predestination and grace (cf note 7)...let us...hold to the practice of following in all things what the Church teaches...”