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**SAINT LA SALLE AND QUIETISM
A SPECULATION
(1/3)**

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a commentary on a surprising sentence that occurs in the biographies of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, for example in [8, 113] and [2, 366]. The sentence in question is found in a document by a priest-friend, Charles de La Grange, pastor at Villiersle-Bel, denying that La Salle is a Quietist. What is chiefly surprising is that the enemies of John Baptist de La Salle could make such an accusation. How is it that Father La Grange found it necessary to defend his friend against such a charge? (Accusations about Jansenism might be another matter, and some incidental reference will be made to that possibility.)

After all, Quietism was a doctrine that, in the light of La Salle's general life and works, seems to have been a temptation rather far removed from attracting him, though it was certainly (like the other heterodoxies) current in his milieu.

In the following speculations about this seemingly unwarranted accusation, a short description of Quietism and its prevalence in the Paris of Saint La Salle's day will be undertaken. This will be followed by surmises about how it would be possible for people whom the Founder antagonized to have raised the issue and, perhaps, how such suspicions might have been aroused about him.

In the process for La Salle's beatification during the 1880's, the Devil's Advocate at the Roman "process" adduced several weak arguments against him. [1] One of these arguments called attention to his use of some of the vocabulary current among the Jansenists of his day. But although Quietism had also been condemned in La Salle's time, the Roman process makes no parallel mention of his use of the latter's vocabulary. Another major heterodoxy of the day in France was Gallicanism which there is no hint in La Salle's life or writings (though there were attempts to recruit him to it). Calcutt also mentions a fourth problem [2, 63], namely, Cartesianism locally condemned earlier in the century, but this was primarily a philosophical principle that infected most of western Europe and raised difficulties antecedent to the spiritual doctrines that concern this paper. (It could be, however, that a major weakness among many heresies is the passion for Descartes' "clear and distinct ideas.")

ABOUT QUIETISM

As with the Gallicanism and the Jansenism raging in the feverish French air of the day, Quietism was a contagion that reached many priests, religious and devout lay people. John Baptist de La Salle, however, seemed immune to all of them. [Cf. 3, 48] On the other hand, there was a common vocabulary in use among those interested in French spirituality of that century, so that La Salle perforce used terminology found in many of the hysterias that his contemporaries were prone to. (Calcutt [2, 65ff] treats Gallicanism and Jansenism together under the subtitle "La Salle meets Gallicanism and Jansenism." He also notes [2, 64] that it is hard to imagine a twenty-year old student in Paris during the 1670's not engaging his fellow students in lively debates on these matters.) How he escaped the several pathologies is a great grace for us. A large fraction of his classmates did not escape Jansenism, nor did his own younger brother, a priest who remained one until death. (Cf. [2, 63] and [4])

Encyclopedias and other standard sources agree that Quietism is a virus that has infected most major religions and that it had ancient sources in Lao Tse and Zen Buddhism, Brahmanism, the "apatheia" of the Stoics, gnosticism, Eutychianism, hesychasm, illuminism, certain types of mysticism, etc. In this general sense, it "consists in seeking union with the divinity by passive tranquillity and renunciation of personal initiative." ([5] Vol. 5) Quietism gives a negative answer to the famous question whether one can *actively* pursue the ideal of what are really passive contemplative states.

The "French mind" has a reputation of passion for logic. A good example might be one aspect of Quietism, namely, carrying out theological thrust of its premises. Thus it was a logical step for many forms of Quietism to extend its view from the internal to the external action, to recommend a behavioral passivity along with its devotional passivity-to urge an antinomianism and even to recommend a disregard, if not contempt, for moral virtue. Some earlier views of Meister Eckhart and the Beghards along these lines in upper Europe were formally condemned by the Church, and so were the southern European "alumbrados." (Note, however, that the contemplative emphases of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila did not fall into these traps, nor did Ignatius Loyola, whose *Spiritual Exercises* are diametrically opposed to such views.)

Perhaps under the influence of the Protestants who were scandalized by external excrescences, Catholics in the sixteenth century began to purify their devotions. However, some parts of the Counter Reformation may have led in the seventeenth century, as Conzemius claims, to another movement: "Quietism must be regarded as a reaction against the voluntarist spirituality of Ignatius and the Jesuits in the 'Spiritual Exercises.'" [5] At any rate, it was in La Salle's century that a full crisis developed.

The main center for the Quietist movement in the mid-1600's was Michael Molinos, a priest from Spain, who brought a thorough-going version of Quietism to Rome where he spent most of his adult life-the latter part of it confined by authorities to a monastery. (The name "Quietism" was not his, but was a French appellation.) Molinos was a very popular spiritual director, and his writings had initially received Church approval from Roman authorities and spread to France and to the rest of Europe.

H. Denzinger's *Enchiridion Symbolorum* lists the sixty-eight propositions from Molinos that were condemned by the Church. [6] Not all of these qualified as outright heresy, but all were proscribed by the Church. Some of the ones relevant to this paper include: "It is necessary for man to annihilate his own powers, and this is the interior way. Actively to wish to do (anything) is to offend God...Natural action is inimical to grace...for God wants to work in us without us. He who in prayer uses imaginings, figures, forms and his own conceptions does not adore God in spirit and in truth (Jn 4,23). ... [I]n interior life every reflexive concern is harmful, even reflection on one's human actions and on one's own defects."

In paraphrase, some of the other propositions are these: Interior life is darkness; do not think of reward or punishment... Do not worry about sanctification. True love does not invoke argument or reason. Discursive prayer impedes the voice of God. Get rid of "acts" in prayer; "the work of prayer is to remain in obscure faith" and in the presence of God. "Sensible devotion" is bad. Passive resignation is enough for preparation and thanksgiving after communion; in fact, reject such devotional steps. The interior soul reaches a nothingness in which there is no moving of body or soul that touches it. Love of the human Christ or of Mary is bad. The interior soul reaches total state of imperturbability and immobility.

When Molinos moves from the interior to the exterior, he seems to get even further from orthodoxy. Several of his propositions can be summarized as follows:

- Remaining cold in prayer is a good sign.
- Set aside mere virtue if it entails feelings.
- Sacred times and places should not arouse emotions.
- The interior soul need no longer recite the *Our Father*.

"On an occasion of temptation, even the most furious, the soul ought not to elicit explicit acts of the opposed virtue, but ought to remain in the above-mentioned love and resignation."

Voluntary mortifications are bad.

Exterior works are not necessary, as witness the case of the most Blessed Virgin.

Blasphemies and carnal acts come from the devil and so are excusable and in fact lead to humiliation and sanctification and union with God; they should be resigned to.

Interior life is unconnected with confession or any theology or philosophy, and in fact these are impossible for it by the time it reaches mystical death.

One interesting and judgmental proposition might be a warning for some of us: "The theologian has a lesser disposition than a simple man in the contemplative state: first, because he does not have a pure faith; second, because he is not humble; third, because he does not care for his own salvation; fourth, because he chiefly has reference to imaginings, forms, opinions and speculations, and in this way he cannot enter into true light."

Even more extreme are the following two:

The interior soul obeys God and does not follow any other obedience.

It is ludicrous to ask interior souls to obey bishops; even councils and scripture are not superior to an interior soul; the hidden things of God cannot be seen by outside authorities.

We can see from this list of propositions that St. La Salle, both in his conduct and in his writings, had little or no inclination toward most of these propositions and, in fact, was diametrically opposed to almost all of them. It is remarkable that Fr. Charles de La Grange needed to call attention to this fact. In particular, the final propositions above, on Church authority, were totally alien to him, but the former propositions on the interior life may have had a certain appeal. In fact, La Salle stated, in quite orthodox terms, some related views on the interior life as will be cited below.

Canon Jean Baptiste Blain, who wrote the first published biography of La Salle and was a close friend and supporter, offers some corroboration about the resistance which he showed toward Quietism. [3, 48]: La Salle had included in the Brothers' prayer book a sentence that read, "I declare, O my God, that even if there were no life to hope for after this present one, I should not cease to love you." This sounded a bit like something Fenelon might have included in his semi-Quietist book *Maxims of the Saints* condemned in 1699. When this suspicion was called to La Salle's attention, he withdrew the passage immediately.

Blain goes on to note that the Founder's own prayer-life remains a mystery, but, judging from externals, he was someone who reached a very advanced level of contemplation. In speaking of this, Blain [3, 194-195] is quick to rule out the excesses of Quietism, not only for the Founder but for the Brothers.

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1. Brother Luke Salm, research paper circulated to participants in the Buttimer Institute.
 2. Brother Alfred Calcutt, *DE LA SALLE: A City Saint and His Liberation of the Poor through Education*. De La Salle Publications, Oxford. 1993. Pp. 1-650.
 3. Jean Baptiste Blain, *THE MIND AND HEART OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE, 1651-1719*. (Trans. Br. Edwin Bannon). Lasallia-Oxford, 1998
 4. Although the paper deals with the attractions of Quietism in La Salle's time, it might be mentioned that Jansenism also had a strong appeal. Some present-day research by the late Andrew Simon, long-time curator of the Lasallian Library at Saint Mary's College of California and author of a paper on the subject [Andrew A. Simon, "St. John Baptist de La Salle and Jansenism," *HORIZONS*, p.14-21, Vol. 12, No. 1, Fall 1994.] led him to believe that La Salle did not become a firm anti-Jansenist until 1702, only a short time before its formal condemnation. The vocabulary of Jansenism was pious and "spiritual," so it is to be expected, *pace* the Devil's Advocate, that all serious Catholics occasionally use its terminology without being guilty of its errors. (We might note, on the chance that it will help clarify the difference: in Protestantism, Jansenism found its reflection in the Calvinist and Puritan traditions while Quietism is reflected in the simplicities of Quakerism.)
 5. Victor Conzemius, article "Quietism" in *SACRAMENTUM MUNDI, An Encyclopedia of Theology*, Volume 5. Herder and Herder, 1970.
 6. Heinrich Denzinger, *ENCHIRIDION SYMBOLORUM*, thirty-second edition. Herder, Barcelona, 1963.

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