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SAINT LA SALLE AND QUIETISM A SPECULATION (2/3)

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DISCUSSION

Ronald Knox's classic analysis of Quietism (and other fads in the history of the Church) occurs in the well known text, *Enthusiasm*. He offers a framework of eight dichotomies useful for examining Quietism and its lack of balanced, [7, 262ff]:

- (1) Action versus Passivity (Quietists urged passivity even though they were most active in propagandizing their views!);
- (2) Use of Intellectual versus Intuitive Considerations in Prayer;
- (3) Imageless Prayer versus Meditation on the Sacred Humanity (If we are to contemplate God, who cannot be imaged, then we must avoid images—such was the stern logic of serious Quietists);
- (4) Multiple Acts versus the Universal and Enduring Act;
- (5) Abandonment to God's Will versus Prayers of Petition (It is chiefly in the semi-quietism of Fenelon that the doctrine of "disinterested love" is carried to extremes);
- (6) Quietists' View of Consolations versus the Prayer of Darkness (Knox quotes St. Jane de Chantal: "There is some lack of humility in making so much of serving God by aridity," and he observes that it is too bad for the saints who disagreed with Fenelon and the formidable Madame Guyon);
- (7) Despising the Virtues versus Cultivating Them (Persevere in prayer and take no notice of temptations; when we are tempted, "the apex of the soul remains undisturbed");
- (8) Bossuet versus Fenelon.

With regard to this last point, Knox has a long section on that famous controversy, putting Fénelon in a rather favorable light as compared to the Gallican Bossuet. Since there is a certain analogy between Montanism and Quietism, Bossuet seemed to think that the revival of mysticism was a similar evil, and justified this view by comparing it with a parallel fascination for prophecy in Montanists' time. [6, 283-286]

FURTHER COMMENTARY

A footnote by Brother Donald Mouton in Maillefer's *Life* [8, 235] describing Quietism, concludes with an observation about "its elitist understanding of God's grace." This criticism might be generalized to the religious atmosphere of

Fiance at that time. Calcutt [2, 65] puts it this way: "The seventeenth century spirituality outlined above, it may be noted, was that of a social elite striving to be other-worldly, and not pressed by the needs of others." Its emphasis was on private salvation and to that extent may seem narcissistic, especially for a generation that came after that of the out-going spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul. As Bremond and others might claim, the seventeenth century for France was the golden age of spirituality, but one has to add, with Calcutt [2, 63], "...[I]t has a certain grim pessimism about human nature. There is so much insistence on abnegation, 'annihilation,' dependence, that it is difficult, at times to see what place is left for a free personal response to grace and a flowering of our innate being...."

Calcutt seems right to hold that the brevity of La Salle's stay as a graduate student in Paris was probably a blessing, given that it was a hotbed of doctrinal infections at the time. (He documents [2, 63] the fact that more than a third of La Salle's fellow students at the Sorbonne were known Jansenists.)

LA SALLE'S OWN POSITION

The Founder's views on these matters can be found primarily in two sources. First is the *Collection*. (Calcutt notes [2, 282] that this booklet was approved by the inquisitor general in Avignon, 1705) In the section on "Reflections the Brothers may use on the means of becoming interior" we find a discussion of "renunciation" in various forms. These renunciations help us to become "interior." Thus, we must renounce our own judgment "because the interior spirit is 'a wisdom which is hidden, which none of the princes of this world knew' [I Cr 2, 7] and as this wisdom is unknown to men, they cannot use it to obtain the interior spirit." At [9,102] he urges "interior retirement" and gives reasons: "Because, when the interior powers are withdrawn from outward things, the soul finds great facility in occupying itself with God," and "because, while it lasts, interior retirement obliges us, in some sense, to be occupied with God and the things of God." [It seems that this is certainly *language* which the Devil's Advocate could have cited.]

Secondly, we have La Salle's *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer*, which was published in 1739 and, most experts agree, based on lectures and notes prepared for novices as early as the 1690's. (Calcutt notes 2, 273) that publishing anything religious required ecclesiastical permission, and given the excitements of that time, it was hardly prudent to seek approval until later. The case of the *Collection* was different: its contents were largely quotations from approved sources.) We cite here from the 1912 edition of the *Explanation* in English, which makes it clear that the centered, quiet state is reached only after time-consuming effort and application on the part of the one praying. Thus, if we make a distinction between "acquired and infused contemplation" found in the histories of spirituality, La Salle speaks almost exclusively of the former.

His was hardly a *laissez faire Dieu* system. This claim is made evident by his use of an elaborate analogy [10, 32-34], comparing the development of a contemplative person to that of an artist. The trained artist, as compared with the untrained beginner, when faced with a masterpiece can appreciate it with a quiet, non-discursive attitude. La Salle concludes, in a way that a Quietist would not [10, 36]: "To attain this facility the soul must exercise a continual

vigilance over itself, so as to detach itself from all earthly ties; for God vouchsafes this grace to those souls alone who are exceedingly pure or whom He wishes to purify Himself, by this means, as a special favor.” With this last phrase, “by this means....” does he intend to support the view of the Quietists that they can expect God to skip over the preparations by special graces in their regard? Or is he simply not eliminating the exceptional case where a well-disposed soul may be taken rather directly and without elaborate preparation into infused contemplation?

On page 46 La Salle points us to contemplation by recommending, “...we should contrive to use fewer words in [our] reflections and remain for some time in an interior silence, in order to let the reflection penetrate our mind in a more interior manner.”

When La Salle refers to “simple attention, which is also called contemplation” [10, 78], he notes, “We remain in this attitude of mind and disposition of heart for as long as we feel attracted and profitably occupied. This contemplation should not be interrupted by the making of particular acts to express these interior dispositions. It is not necessary to analyze or express these sentiments, since we can conceive them by a simple and implicit conception of the heart... But this disposition of the soul must be active and ardent and always with the object in view of urging us to the practice of Christian virtues, as before mentioned.” It is evident that La Salle here is capturing what is good in the Quietist instinct without falling into the errors described above.

This is evident again by page 107 where he reminds us, “This method of simple attention, when accompanied by the proper dispositions, attracts the soul gently and effectually to the practice of ...virtue... This helps smooth the way to perfection and enables us to overcome with ease the opposition of our vicious nature...”

Here we might mention parenthetically that André Rayez, in the recent book edited by Brother Robert Berger [14,159-165], relates these matters to some letters of spiritual direction written by the Founder. Rayez calls attention to the language sounding Quietistic in one letter about the prayer of suffering, but adds, “He knew well that the state of quiet ran the risk of being misunderstood...” and quotes from the letter, “All you need and all God wants of you is that you remain in His presence.” He even sees [14,215] places in the *Explanation* where La Salle “half opens the door to contemplation and passivity in the same

spirit as, and sometimes in the language of Canfeld....” (Canfeld’s semi-quietist book had been condemned in 1699.)

Perhaps the strongest non-Quietist statement in the *Collection* is the famous passage: “Do not make any difference between matters proper to your profession and the matter of your salvation and of your perfection. Be assured that you will never save yourself better nor ever achieve as much perfection as by acquitting yourself well of the duties of your state, provided you do so in view of God’s order.” (Calcutt’s translation [2, 284]). On page 286 Calcutt goes on to cite a passage [9,106] about interior prayer that Quietists might find acceptable: “Do not look for anything sensitive in prayer. Hold to what is of faith and which leads to hate and destruction of sin, to detachment from created things, and to imitating Jesus Christ ... as perfectly as possible.” From the *Explanation of the Method*, he translates: “Mental prayer is an interior occupation because the soul is occupied with what is proper to it in this life ... But the principal occupation of the soul in prayer which is truly interior is to fill itself with God and to unite itself inwardly with him.... It is in the interior of the soul that this [Holy] Spirit communicates with it, and lets it know what God requires of it.” [2, 286]

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7. Ronald Knox, *ENTHUSIASM*, University Press, Oxford. 1950.
 8. Dom F. Maillefer, *SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE: Two Early Biographies*, Dom Maillefer and Brother Bernard. Edited by Brother Paul Grass and translated by Brother Donald Mouton. Lasallian Publications, Landover MD. 1996.
 9. John Baptist de La Salle, *COLLECTION: Short Treatises for the Use of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, Lasalle Bureau, New York, 1932. (An updated translation by W. J. Battersby, edited by Brother Daniel Burke, appeared in 1993 from Lasallian Publications, Landover, Maryland.)
 10. John Baptist de La Salle, *EXPLANATION OF THE METHOD OF MENTAL PRAYER* Procure Generale, Paris, 1912. (An updated translation by Brother Richard Arandez; edited by Brother Donald Mouton, appeared in 1995 from Lasallian Publications, Landover Maryland, under the title *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*.

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