



05-D-09

THE JOY OF LIVING FOR THE SERVICE OF OTHERS

It is always difficult to put into writing and to share with others what, in a certain sense, concerns the most intimate part of our lives. This becomes easier, however, if it helps other people and if it tells them of the joy to be found in serving others.

I am a lay teacher in a hamlet far from the provincial capital of Jujuy. I am married and am the mother of five children. In my life I have experienced a wonderful conversion like that of St. Paul. The instrument of my conversion was a man who, by the example of his life, opened up for me new perspectives: the realization that I am a teacher of love and laughter, the bearer of a message, filled with wonder each day by the simple hearts of children, in short, a Christian teacher because I am a Lasallian teacher.

THE DISCOVERY OF DE LA SALLE AND HIS CHARISM

In a sense I discovered God and de La Salle at the same time, after a life from which God was completely absent. My indifference was suddenly dispelled by a sense of need which was connected with the founding of a Lasallian school for the marginalized in a poor district of the province of Jujuy in the north of Argentina. I took on this work after resigning from my previous post. Without my seeking the present situation, this sense of need became a reality in my life.

The discovery of God came with the discovery of a teacher and of his dedication, his service, his humility and his gift of himself. Discovering de La Salle meant discovering the possibility of doing now what he did long ago. Thus it was that the Gospel passage "Suffer them to come to me" became the inspiration of my professional life.

In the depth of my heart I was anxious to get to know de La Salle better, and as I penetrated deeper into his charism my spirit opened out as if liberty had given it wings. My pupils were not just children whom I happened to be teaching, they were material to be moulded into a new creation, young lives bringing a sense of wonder into my life. I felt a sense of responsibility as a co-creator in the work of the Lord where it is the person who matters not just the instruction given.

The pupils of the school, very poor, badly nourished, poorly clothed and lacking in education, made the task difficult. The hours of class were not long enough. I had to give a little more of my time. From day to day the formation meetings became more demanding. It was at that point that I entered on the way of de La Salle with little daily renunciations and with the difficulties experienced in the formation session of the educative community. To work together in a spirit of fraternal love presents difficulties for which, as de La Salle knew, prayer provides the answer.

Looked at in this light, inadequacies, sufferings, misunderstandings and even discouragement all become sources of joy because de La Salle experienced them also. All these things strengthen the will and are part of service.

One experiences a thirst for knowledge which is not simply a matter of professional duty but a new aspiration: teaching is a way to sanctification and happiness. The school yard is gradually transformed, the sad little faces light up with smiles and the silence gives way to joyful chatter. The Brothers bring their tenderness to all and the lay teachers make a new discovery: that of having been the bearers of happiness to others. What joy de La Salle had brought into my life!

THE DISCOVERY OF FAITH IN THE FAMILY

The charism of de La Salle is gradually becoming part of my life and the little sacrifices made in the service of my school become less painful. I see them as a necessary part of my work. Priorities are appearing in my scale of values. To be born to a new life and to be true to myself are among the first.

De La Salle comes also to the family in the person of little Peter who is poorly clothed and who suffers from the cold, of John, a real little devil, or of Mary who cannot learn the vowels. We share their sufferings and their needs. In this way we grow in faith in the midst of our daily occupations. My work is not just my own, it is that of us all. De La Salle is not for me alone, now he is for us all.

I read his life to my family, proud of having so important a friend and proud of my profession as a teacher. In this way the Lasallian family becomes a reality. The laughter of my pupils forms a chorus with that of my own children and they are always asking of my husband, José.

However, there is something wanting. I feel an urge each day as I get to know the Founder better, to give myself more and more. As a result we work better, or rather, we live more fully during catechism lessons, at parents' meetings or outings, etc.

THE URGE TO GO TO THE MISSION FIELD

De La Salle puts before us the daily effort: preferential attention to the poor. We must try continually to form a synthesis of faith, culture and life. One's sense of need becomes more and more pressing. In the midst of the joy of discovery and of forming a wonderful community come renouncement and separation. The Claretian priests ask our help and we have to leave all. Once again the words of de La Salle stimulate us and show us the path to follow: "I ask you, O my God, to make known to me your will in this matter. What should decide my choice? the greater glory of God, better service of the Church, my own perfection, the salvation of souls? The same voice that called me here seems to call me elsewhere. It is true that the hand of God, which placed me where I am, can take me away from here".

Thus we were asked to leave all we had built up. It was not "our" work. It was God's work. But if the call of the Lord is pressing, that of his servant is also: go to the poor, to the needy, to the marginalised, "leave all and follow me".

By his life de La Salle speaks to us of Providence, of abandonment... and we find the light and the motivation to act. We have, therefore, left all; friends, school, etc. and have gone. How sad the leave-taking was! The same voice that called us here asked us to leave. We had to begin anew.

How we upset the Lasallian community! The new beginning was not easy, but Christ needs courageous, dedicated Christians, free to talk of freedom, poor to speak of humility, disinterested to speak of the gift of self, gentle to speak of gentleness, confident to speak of hope.

It is what de La Salle says, "Reanimate your confidence in his infinite goodness and do him the honour of trusting yourselves to him without worry about the present or fear for the future, thinking only of the present moment in which you live".

Brothers, that is how I live and though I am not in a Lasallian school I feel more Lasallian than ever in my new life. If God is in my heart here is where he wants me to be among the poor and most needy.

THE REGION WHERE I WORK

The Lord asked us to go, to leave everything and to abandon ourselves to providence in a little village on the high plateau, Abra Pampa, at an altitude of 3,400 metres and at a distance of 230 kilometres from the provincial capital, Jujuy. It is lonely and inhospitable, with intense cold and constant winds.

The village is made up of houses with mud walls and thatched roof and a street of trodden earth. The winter is severe. Poverty brings each day its quota of humiliations. Loneliness and wind are our sole companions and the silence needs continual getting used to.

The people are, for the most part, illiterate, subjected to marginalization and exploitation. They are the "Coyas", descendants of the Incas of the country, silent and almost impenetrable, accustomed only to suffering.

Here as in other places poverty is the mortal sin, hunger crucifies Christ every day, illiteracy is the common lot, children have never learned to smile, here is where labourers are needed for the harvest!

DE LA SALLE MORE ALIVE THAN EVER IN A SCHOOL

This is how the Lasallian star continues to shine in my heart and in that of my family, opening up new paths and bringing new smiles. I explain to people that it is still possible to love, that we are seeking solutions to their problems. In this way life, the Gospel and love enter the community.

At present I am teaching in a government school where there are no Brothers but where de La Salle is more alive than ever. Yes. He is here also! They knew nothing of de La Salle but the desire to share in this service existed unsuspected. The Lord had need of us here.

We form here a really fine Christian community where children are given first place. In addition, catechesis attracts volunteers. We read the writings of de La Salle, share the knowledge of him that we have gained and draw courage and enlightenment from it.

This year, with the help of two lady teachers from the school, we are organizing a course in Lasallian spirituality and we are trying to put it into practice in our daily lives.

We are thus opening up avenues of hope. I pray God to send more labourers to the harvest where we are most needed. We have need of Christians of courage, daring and disinterestedness. God will provide the rest.

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