

TEACHING RELIGION THROUGH SONGS

De La Salle was at one and the same time a teacher, a psychologist and a saint, and this is reflected in his writings. He was aware of the various trends in educational psychology of his day and made use of what was best in them.

As far as the teaching of religion is concerned he was strongly influenced by the methods of St. Sulpice. These he had studied, used, adapted and passed on to his followers. In the "Directory of the Associates of the Catechism of Perseverance of St. Sulpice", St. John Baptist de La Salle and St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort are both listed as being the most famous practitioners of these methods.

In the Sulpician method, pupils were put into the right frame of mind for their religion lessons by a combination of the presence of God, prayer and singing. De La Salle knew how effective singing could be. From a psychological point of view, it can calm a person, bring peace; it can also stimulate and motivate. From a pedagogical point of view, singing makes the meaning of words more vivid, easier to assimilate and memorise. From the point of view of religious experience and worship, as St. Augustine says: "He who sings prays twice". One could illustrate very easily the truth of all this.

And so De La Salle spent much of his free time composing lyrics for songs which fitted in with what his teachers taught in their religion lessons during the course of the year. What he wrote could not compete with Corneille and Moliere for elegance, but it contained all the wealth of knowledge and expertise of a theologian trained at the Sorbonne.

In school, week after week, the pupils learnt the truths of religion which would turn them into committed Christians, by singing the lyrics of De La Salle set to popular contemporary tunes. Each day, teachers and pupils begged the Holy Spirit to enlighten their faith with his light, a faith which they followed in spirit and truth (intellectual acceptance and good works); a faith which finds its expression in a series of truths which must be passed on and accepted with a heart full of love.

The following table will enable the reader to judge for himself the importance attached to the various concepts which are repeated over and over again in the different songs sung each day of the week:

Mo Tu We Th Fr Sa

Holy Spirit	x	x	x	x	x	x
Light		x	x	x	x	
To enlighten	x	x		x	x	
Faith		x		x	x	
To believe		x		x	x	
To practise	x	x	x	x	x	x
Truths	x	x	x		x	x
To teach	x	x	x		x	
To instruct		x				
To listen			x			
To learn				x		x
Heart	x	x	x			
Love	x	x			x	x

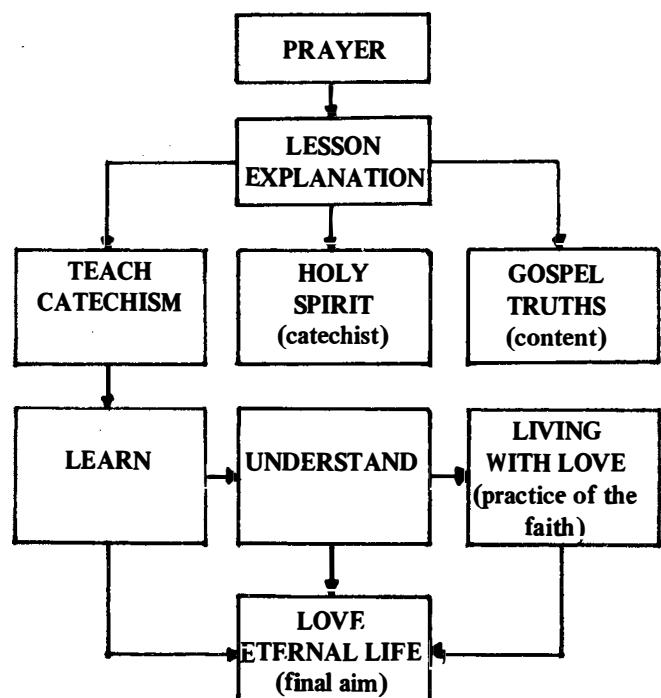
Here is an example of one of the songs, the one for Saturday which I think is one of those with the most meaning:

Lord, send me your Spirit
To make me good and wise;
To teach me about Jesus,
What a child of my age should know.

Holy Spirit, make me understand
What you are going to say;
And as you teach me your truths
Help me to practise them too.

Let us love God, however young we may be
Let us do everything with love in our hearts;
Let us learn how, here below,
To love him for all eternity.

The lines are short and few in number, but the religious concepts that are included are both fundamental and numerous. I have tried to illustrate what I mean by a schematic diagram accompanied by a commentary from the writings of the Founder.



1. PRAYER

The St. Sulpice religion teacher (and his pupils) was supposed to begin and end his lessons by prayer, and pray during the lesson also (cf. Ms of St. Sulpice). In a booklet entitled: "Daily Exercises used in the Christian Schools" De La Salle bequeaths to us the sort of prayer that has been used for centuries now in Brothers' schools.

2. EXPLANATION

The reader can refresh his memory by referring to Chapter IX of the Conduct of Schools (pp. 96-109) if he cannot remember the general principles outlined there.

3. WHAT A CHILD OF MY AGE SHOULD KNOW

That is what the pupils say in their prayers. The Meditations as well as the Conduct of Schools are full of recommendations like the following: "Answers should be within the grasp of pupils, but not only of the cleverest and sharpest ones, but rather of the slowest ones. In that way most pupils will be able to answer questions without much difficulty" (Cond. Ch. 9, p. 102).

4. WHAT YOU ARE GOING TO SAY

What a frightening responsibility for a teacher of religion who really believes these words of De La Salle!

"It is likewise by the movement of the same Spirit that all those who announce God's kingdom speak even today" (Med. 3, 2).

"He wants your disciples to see him in you and receive your teaching as if he (Jesus) were teaching them" (Med. 195, 2).

5. TO TEACH ME ABOUT JESUS

This refers to Gospel sayings. Could there be a better summary of "The Duties of a Christian" than the following words?

"Because Christ wants all Christians to be perfect, he has given them and left in writing a great many Christian sayings, in his own words or in those of the Apostles. Christians should read these often and think about them so as to be able to put them into practice, and by so doing become perfect Christians" (Duties p. 192).

St. La Salle says the same thing on innumerable occasions throughout his writings.

6. AND AS YOU TEACH ME YOUR TRUTHS

On numerous occasions De La Salle repeats how important it is for teachers of religion and their pupils to know their catechism:

"Teachers will be so careful about the way they teach, that all their pupils without exception will know what they have been taught, at least, as far as what a Christian is supposed to know is concerned, with regard to both doctrine and practice" (Conduct Chap. 9, pp. 102-103). Once again the combination of theory and practice.

7. HOLY SPIRIT, MAKE ME UNDERSTAND

The main reason that De La Salle gives for singing before a religion lesson is to ask the Holy Spirit for help to be able to understand the truths that

are going to be explained, and then to put them into practice.

In Meditation 193, he says the following with the psychological insight typical of him:

"For these children are simple and for the most part poorly brought up. Those who help them to save themselves must speak simply, so that every word will be clear and easy to understand" (Med. 193, 3).

8. HELP ME TO PRACTISE THEM TOO

For De La Salle as for Paul of Tarsus or St. James, faith without works is dead. This is something that De La Salle stresses very often, as in the extracts from his Meditations that follow:

"It will not then be enough to have taught your disciples the mysteries and truths of our religion, if you have not helped them to learn the chief Christian virtues, and if you have not taken a very special care to help them put these virtues into practice, as well as all the good of which they are capable at their age. For no matter how much faith they may have, nor how lively it may be, if they are not practising any good works at all, their faith will be of no use to them" (Med. 200, 3).

"It is then not enough to provide children with a Christian mentality and teach them the mysteries and doctrines of our religion. We must also teach them the practical maxims that are found throughout the holy Gospel" (Med. 197, 2).

9. LET US DO EVERYTHING WITH LOVE... TO LOVE HIM FOR ALL ETERNITY

As for the Beloved Disciple, so for De La Salle, fulfilling the Law is motivated by love. In the long and closely argued introduction to the Ten Commandments in his "Duties of a Christian", De La Salle uses as a springboard the words of Christ: "You will love the Lord with all your heart... and your neighbour as yourself". In the preface to this work, he writes: "All that a Christian has to do in this world is to know God and to love him".

CONCLUSION

I limited myself on purpose to only one religious song, one, you will agree, which is typical of the Founder's work. This whole area has a great deal to offer but is still untapped. I wonder whether prayer and the Holy Spirit are still valid in the teaching of religion these days? Or whether people could link up "What a child of my age should know" with catechesis based on the experience of the pupil? How deeply rooted are the religious beliefs of our pupils? Can modern man restrict his faith simply to a few beliefs? What is the point of frenetic activity if love is missing? Teach religion on a guitar? It is now more than 300 years ago that a certain religion teacher called De La Salle found an answer to all these questions through a happy combination of lyrics and catchy tunes.

Brother Manuel F. Magaz