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DISCIPLESHIP A CALL TO FOLLOW CHRIST THROUGH IDENTIFICATION WITH THE POOR (1/2)

Introduction

The scope of this short essay is to look into some forgotten aspects of discipleship, to read through St. John Baptist de La Salle (hereafter DLS)'s writings and experience in order to see how these aspects intersect with them. We have selected four which have a real interest for us: 1- discipleship as a personal encounter after a call; 2- discipleship for the sake of the Cross; 3- discipleship as victory over fears, and 4- discipleship as sharing the mysteries of Christ.

These four aspects turn around the axis of the service to the poor because 1- our call to discipleship is a call to encounter them and to love them; 2- we follow Christ for the sake of his Cross which shares and redeems the cross of the poor; 3- through true discipleship we learn to overcome our fears and give them hope, and 4- through discipleship we share with them the mysteries of Christ, in a continuous and joyful identification with them.

Needless to say that it is all implied in the Lasallian spiritual writings where DLS moves freely from the Brothers' experience to his grasp of ecclesiology. It is through his writings and experience that we will try to see these four aspects of discipleship.

1. DISCIPLESHIP. CALL AND ENCOUNTER WITH GOD FOR AN IRREVOCABLE CONVERSION TO THE POOR

It was only after many years that DLS discovered what type of call he was following. "If I had even thought that the care, motivated by pure charity, which I gave to the schoolteachers would ever impose on me the duty of residing with them, I would have stopped it. For, since quite naturally I consider lower than my valet the men I was obliged to employ in the schools, especially at the beginning, the very thought of having to live with them would have been intolerable to me. And as a matter of fact I felt great distress in the early period

when I had them come and live in my house, a period that lasted two years." (1)

God's action in DLS' life is summarized in the unobtrusive call of God and his gradual conversion to the poor "God guides everything wisely and gently and does not usually do violence to the inclinations of men. Therefore, when he determined to urge me into devoting myself completely into the care of the schools, He did so in a manner that escaped my knowledge over a long period of time, with the result that one commitment led to another that I had not foreseen at the beginning". (2)

After nights of prayer and a continuous presence to God DLS was able to discover –almost in a slow conscious way– Christ in the person of the dispossessed children of Rheims. DLS saw a kind of "natural" identification between these poor children and Jesus Christ and does not hesitate to ask the Brothers: "Do you honor Jesus Christ in their person?" (M 133, 3) (3)

The holy founder calls the Brothers to look upon these children with real "tenderness" – "For these children, he says, are often like orphans... as far as the salvation of their souls is concerned. It is for this reason that God has appointed you their guardian" (M 37, 3).

In his deliberate choice for the poor, in becoming man, God chose poverty. Through his "kenosis" or voluntary self-denial of his divinity, he lived as a poor man from cradle to the cross proclaiming the beatitude of poverty. DLS passes from the gravity of this mystery to a personal application: "Our Lord was born poor and loved the poor: he was glad to be with them and even said that the poor are blessed because the Kingdom of God belonged to them" MTR (10th or 202, 2). "The poorer we are the more fully we shall possess the spirit of Jesus Christ who glorified in living a life of poverty" M 179, 1.

The spirit of Jesus in us means discipleship open to the poor. "Look upon them as the image of Jesus Christ, and as the best way to be disposed to receive his spirit abundantly. In this way the more you cherish them, the more you will be united to Jesus Christ." M 173.1.

In this Meditation for the feast of St. Francis of Assisi we see in a few lines how the classical call to encounter God through discipleship ends up with the encounter with the poor. In a shorter way DLS says: "When we have voluntarily embraced poverty to imitate Jesus Christ, we love as he did those whom God has allowed to be poor." M 166.2. For the Brother, the poor may be considered as "sacraments" of God. Obviously, to say that the poor are "sacraments" or "sacramentals" of God does not mean that there is an ontological identification between them and Jesus but, they are so close to him that we cannot miss them when we follow him. "You should recognize Jesus beneath the rags of the poor children whom you have to teach. Adore him in their person." M 96.3.

The personal call to discipleship is thus far from being a call to a bi-lateral dialogue with God. There is a kind of trinitarian movement which true discipleship creates intensely between the Brother, Jesus and the poor children. "The love of the Brother for his pupils is for them sacrament of God's love. But it is also a sacrament for the Brother himself. His educational relationship to his pupils educates him to love God more fully... They evangelize him." (4)

In such movement DLS invites the Brother to become more transparent: "Jesus Christ wants that your pupils consider you as they would consider Him and receive your instructions as if it were from Him... Your pupils are the letter which he has dictated to you and which you are writing daily in their hearts." MTR (3rd or 195.2).

This is the first aspect that we wanted emphasize: discipleship starts with a call to meet God but it materializes by preferring, honoring and loving the poor because they are the image of Jesus Christ. It is only thus that we succeed in making them into disciples too, able to meet God.

2. DISCIPLESHIP: FOR THE CROSS OF JESUS FOR THE CROSS OF THE POOR

Ernest Best brings out the idea that "there are three commands in discipleship: come, deny, take up, followed by a present continuous mode "follow me". The call is not one to accept a certain system of teaching, live by it, continue faithfully to interpret it and pass it on—which was in essence the call of a rabbi to his disciples; nor is it a call to accept a philosophical position which will express itself in a certain type of behavior—as in Stoicism; nor is it a call to pass through certain rites—as in the Mysteries, so as to become an initiated of God, his companion. The carrying of the cross is no rite! It is a call to fall in behind Jesus and go with him." (5)

There is an upheaval in Jesus relationship to the notion of "family" in Matthew 10.36. In these texts the family relationship represents for the disciple a real cross, difficult to bear till Jesus becomes the real family to him. The choice is between the disciple's vision of the family and Jesus' radical new stance: Jesus is the family in which he wants his disciple to include all the poor of the earth.

To stand by the poor as Jesus stood by them till the cross is to share their plight and suffering. After Jesus, all the oppressed of the earth are invited to project one day their own frustration and helplessness on his cross. While matching their cross to his they are also called to see in it not a minus sign "-" but a positive sign "+" of resurrection. Through living discipleship the Brother tries to replace the cross of the poor by that of Jesus Christ with all its power of redemption.

This is the second aspect that we wanted to emphasize. Discipleship is not a private affair between the faithful and God, far from it. It is sharing the cross with Christ and the poor. The faith in his resurrection encourages the Brother to carry on without tiredness and fear.

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* Bible quotations from the New American Bible, Catholic Book Publishing Company, New York NY. 1970.

(1) Blain, Jean-Baptiste. *La vie de Monsieur Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*. Translated quotations from French original in Cahiers Lasalliens n. 7, Rome 1961. p. 169.

(2) idem.

(3) De La Salle – *Meditations* (M).
– English translation by W. J. Battersby, Waldgrave Publishers, London 1964. This edition does not include the Meditations for the Time of Retreat.
– The Meditations for the Time of Retreat (MTR). English translation by Augustine Loes, FSC., St. Mary's College Press, Winnona 1975.

(4) Sauvage Michel, FSC., and Campos Miguel, FSC., *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor*, Translated from French by Matthew O'Connell, Christian Brothers National Office, Romeville Illinois, 1981. p. 123.

(5) Best Ernest. *Disciples and discipleship, – studies in the gospel of Mark*. T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1986. p. 8.