

REDISCOVERING ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE (2nd part – 1/2)

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2. A LIFE THAT CONTINUES TO INSPIRE

In the life and teachings of the Founder, one can pick out a number of constant factors that guided and sustained his choices, and which are a permanent example and source of inspiration for all Lasallians. In this connection, I find the following quotation from Merlaud most apposite:

"True creation consists in communicating one's life. Building a ship does not mean simply hoisting the sails, forging the nails, studying the stars, but rather passing on a taste for the sea. The Founder of the Christian Schools acted in this way. He passed on to the crew of his ship a taste for an undertaking, and this undertaking was to help abandoned children, to help them catch a glimpse of their human and Christian destiny. It is for this task that he trained his followers. Before all else, he created the soul of his undertaking. Subsequently, walls rose up as if pulled by an invisible chain; schools multiplied" [1].

2.1 THE WAY HE SAW HISTORY

"John Baptist de La Salle was deeply moved by the way in which 'the children of the artisans and the poor' were abandoned and left to themselves. As a practical response to his prayerful consideration of this fact in relation to God's plan of salvation, he came to discern in faith what God wanted the mission of the Institute to be" (Rule 11).

In this marvellous opening paragraph of Chapter 2 of the Rule, we find in summary form the description of the **guiding principle** of the Founder's life under all its aspects, and the permanent source of inspiration for us today.

For the Founder there is no dichotomy between the **natural plane of phenomena and social problems** (ignorance, lack of appreciation for education in the home, bleak pros-

pects for the future among the working class, inadequate schools) and **the spiritual plane of a relationship with God and of personal sanctification**.

This awareness of the phenomena of his times and his deep religious faith came together in his **contemplation of the history of salvation**.

His "eyes of faith" give him 3 striking insights:

- God's plan of salvation never ceases to act: "God is so good that he not only brings us into existence by his act of creation, but also desires that all of us come to the knowledge of truth" (Med.193,1).
- The young people he sees around him, for a number of reasons (cf. Med.193,2; Med.194,1...), find the road to salvation blocked.
- We become a part of the plan of salvation and cooperate in furthering it by undertaking the "work of God" through our **educational work** which, at one and the same time, provides an essential service to young people and sanctifies us. "Sacred history" is still at work: we are called to be its leading exponents.

I consider this to be the corner stone of the Lasallian approach: all the basic ideas and undertakings of the true Lasallian are supported by it:

- a **"profession"** (teaching) is elevated to the level of an apostolic and ecclesial "ministry".
- **faith** (fidelity to God - consecration) and zeal (fidelity to mankind - mission) come together as dynamic counterweights in a single commitment which includes and reconciles these two aspects of his life: "do not distinguish between the duties of your state and the work of your salvation" [2].
- awareness of concrete needs, seen with the eyes of faith, makes for unprejudiced, realistic, flexible and imaginative responses: educational methods, types of school, innovation in institutional structures, etc. [3].

2.2 THE WAY HE "CAME TO GRIPS" WITH HISTORY

The Founder's basic idea - to play an active part in the history of salvation through education - entails adopting an approach suited to the seriousness and importance of the task in hand.

The major characteristics of this Lasallian approach seem to me to be as follows:

A. The "educational" and "lay" option

Among the various ways open to De La Salle to play a decisive role in the living history of salvation, he chose two which were radical, painful [4] and interdependent:

1. to devote himself totally and exclusively **to education**, a choice which is marvellously expressed in the present Rule: "John Baptist de La Salle gave a new meaning to the school by making it accessible to the poor and offering it to all as a sign of the Kingdom and as a means of salvation" (Rule 3).
2. to form a community of teachers who were **lay religious** [5], with a single aim in view: the service of youth through education.

The first choice was based on two fundamental beliefs: the **salvific value** of the educational apostolate in God's plan (cf. Med.193,1) on the one hand; and the **compelling need of**

young people for religious and human education (cf. Med. 194, 1) on the other.

The second choice was likewise motivated by at least two considerations: on the one hand, the greatness, the completeness and the essential nature of the ministry of education in the service of the Gospel, the Church and the future of young people [6]; and on the other, the fact that a comprehensive and serious educational service needs total dedication: "*Community life and school work involve a person totally*" [7], that is, all his time, his whole heart and even his whole future.

The vocation on which the Lasallian educational commitment is based was seen by the Founder as stemming from:

- consecration to the Blessed Trinity (cf. Med. 46, 3).
- the call of Christ (cf. Med. 196, 2).
- the mandate of the Church (cf. Med. 199, 2).

Clearly these two choices implied a new way of looking at schools and the role and dignity of the teacher [8].

The continued relevance and urgency of these choices for the world today, and their complete agreement with present-day Church thinking are too evident to need stressing [9].

B. The response to the call for "together and by association"

The expression first appeared in 1691 [10] and became the principle which inspired the work of the Founder and the first Brothers.

"**Together and by association**" refers in particular to **community spirit** which is the basis of community life, educational planning and the pursuit of the apostolate.

Moreover, all the biographers of the Founder constantly mention it as if it were a principle which was always invoked when decisions were made in the newly born religious family of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

"*He did not impose anything by recourse to authority*" [11] is the expression constantly used when biographers speak of drawing up the Rule, choosing teaching methods, making vows, moving to Paris, setting up the internal organisation of the Institute, and so on.

For the Founder, the **normal way of proceeding**, when he had difficult decisions to implement, was to seek God's will and discover what good work he was to undertake, by a process of discernment by listening carefully to what the community had to say in its prayers, conversations and discussions.

This discernment is a permanent response to life, to the practical problems of life and the challenge of events. Constant recourse to the Word of God does not prevent, but rather stimulates the community to seek the best way to respond [12].

This is an aspect of the "Lasallian approach" which has not been written about much, but which is now being given a great deal of attention.

Of course, side by side with this "democratic" involvement, there was in the community a parallel growth in the spirit of faith, unity, fraternal love, apostolic zeal, enthusiasm for

God's work, regularity and fidelity. Without this, community discernment would have been impossible.

[1] A. Merlaud, "Jean Baptiste de La Salle, Rome 191, p. 170.

[2] The principle is stated in the Founder's **personal programme**: "It is a good rule of conduct not to make a distinction between the duties of one's state and one's salvation and perfection; and one should rest assured that one will never bring about one's salvation better, and acquire greater perfection, than by performing well the duties of one's state, so long as they are done with a view to accomplishing God's will" (Blain 2, p. 318, CL. 8).

[3] It is enough to recall how, in the lifetime of the Founder, the type of Lasallian establishments progressively changed in response to practical needs: schools for the poor, a Sunday school for workers, a school to train lay teachers, a boarding school for well-off children, a rehabilitation school, a school for prisoners, missionary schools in Huguenot areas. Also one recalls how the body of teaching methodology contained in the **Conduct of Schools** was progressively built up and fine tuned.

[4] Both ways represented a slow and tiring process of personal maturation, discernment, painful cutting of ties, and endless struggle. To the first of them, the Founder's famous admission concerning the founding of the schools is particularly applicable: "At the beginning I had no thought of doing so. It is not as if no one had suggested the plan to me: many of Mr. Roland's friends had tried to make me consider it, but it never entered my head, and it never occurred to me that I could carry it out... If I had thought that the help I was giving the teachers out of pure charity would become a duty binding me to them, I would have dropped everything. But God, who directs all things with wisdom and gentleness and does not usually force people to act, wanting me to take complete charge of the schools, made me do so in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time, in such a way that one commitment led to another without my having foreseen this initially" (CL. 10, p. 106).

[5] The completely lay option took longer to mature, but as early as 1694, in the document recording the election of De La Salle as Superior, the Brothers express themselves very specifically: "...we likewise declare that the present election we have held making M. de La Salle Superior is not a precedent for the future, for it is our decision that after him, in the future and forever after, no one who is a priest or who has received holy orders can join us or be elected Superior..." (**Register of Votes**, p. 18; reproduced in CL. 37, p. 47).

[6] "This is also why you must have an altogether special esteem for the Christian education and teaching of children, since it is the means of helping them become true children of God... Thank God for the grace he has given you in your work of sharing in the ministry of the holy apostles and of the great bishops and pastors of the Church. Take pride in your ministry by making yourselves, as St. Paul says, qualified ministers of the new covenant" (Med. 199, 3).

On the subject of the lay state and its role in the ministry of the Word, Michel Sauvage's work "**Catechese et Laicat**", Paris 1962, is the standard work by the breadth, depth and completeness of its treatment. (Cf. especially pp. 512-525.)

[7] De La Salle, "**Memoire sur l'habit**", 10; Cf. CL. 11, p. 350.

[8] The most complete and methodical treatment of this subject by De La Salle is to be found in the "**Meditations for the Time of Retreat**".

[9] It is sufficient to read the latest Church documents on the Catholic school, and the great reassessment of the role of the laity in the life and mission of the Church in "**Christifideles laici**".

[10] It is contained in the formula of the "heroic vow" made by De La Salle, Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Vuyart on November 21st 1691. From there it passed into the formula of vows which has been used by the Brothers since 1694. In the present Rule, apart from its traditional meaning for the Brothers (Rule 2, 16, 25...), association is used also to describe the type of link that should be established with members of the Lasallian Family (Cf. Rule 17, 146).

[11] Cf. Saturnino Callego, "S. Juan Bautista de La Salle", BAC Madrid 1987, Vol. I, pp. 178, 195, 209, 239, 243, 262, 315, 342...

[12] Cf. M. Sauvage/M. Campos, "Annoncer l'évangile aux pauvres", Paris 1977, pp. 56ss, 380ss.