

THE POOR IN DUTIES I

Brother Manuel F. Magaz

INTRODUCTION

* Coherence is one of the characteristics which appears most in the writings of John Baptist de La Salle. All his spiritual and pedagogical writings, beginning with the Meditations written for the Brothers, and ending with his treatise on Christian Politeness intended for people living in the world, are marked by his rich personality and concern as Founder.

* St John Baptist de La Salle had his fall on the road to Damascus at the door of the convent of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus. It was a fall which, while not physical, was to be decisive. Like Paul, the young canon heard a voice which, from that time onwards, would constantly repeat the same words: **THE POOR**.

* These words, or rather what they represent, took over his mind and heart, became a part of his life, his work as Founder and his writings. All these speak constantly, almost obsessively of the poor and of the "most poor". This article will attempt to outline what the **Duties of a Christian I** says about the poor.

SOURCES

* **Duties I** has frequent recourse to the rich and life-giving source of the Holy Scriptures. This is hardly surprising as the Saint recommends with great insistence that we read the New Testament and especially the Gospel, "our first and principal Rule". **Duties I** relies heavily also on the writings of the Fathers, the Councils and the teachings of the Church. Many pages in his catechism are based - sometimes literally - on the works of two contemporary French catechists: Claude Joly, Bishop of Agen, and Le Coreur, a missionary priest. The former helped La Salle with the section on morals, and the latter with that on theological topics.

REFERENCES TO THE POOR IN DUTIES I

There are 13 pages of varied length in **Duties I** dealing with the poor. To help the reader, I shall quote two sections in full, and give only relevant sentences in all other cases.

1. In the life of Jesus

"Although Jesus could have lived without lacking anything, and although he could have had whatever he desired, still he always lived in such a poor manner that he sometimes had nothing to eat. He did not possess a home to call his own, nor even as he said, a stone on which to lay his head. He was accompanied by his 12 Apostles who were almost all of lowly extraction. He caused them also to experience severe poverty. On one occasion they were forced to rub ears of wheat in their hands to eat the grains contained in them. On a number of other occasions he showed how little he thought of the rich and how much he loved the poor. It was to give public proof of this

that he felt obliged to go and cure a centurion's servant, but did not visit the home of a royal official whose son lay sick in Capharnaum, even though the father had begged him to come and heal the boy. For the same reason he told the parable of the heartless rich man, and stressed the torments this man endured, to show that those who are attached to wealth will be punished in Hell, and that the poor who have suffered patiently the miseries of this life for the love of God, will be happy and filled with consolation in Heaven". (pp. 34-35)

2. **The third commandment of God:** Speaking of good works parents could do on feastdays, he suggests: Visiting the poor in their homes (p. 121).

3. **The seventh commandment of God:** in two places:

- a) when speaking of the obligation to make restitution
- b) when speaking of almsgiving.

a) In cases when one does not know the person robbed or to whom to make restitution, one can fulfil the obligation by giving alms to the poor.

b) almsgiving

"If this commandment forbids everyone to steal the property of another, it also obliges the rich and all those who enjoy some means, to give a part of their possessions to the poor, according to the latter's needs and according to their own ability. The Wise Man assures us of this when he says that we must assist the poor "because of the Commandment", and not abandon him in his poverty. St. John declares that "If someone who possesses worldly goods sees his brother in want, yet closes his heart to him, how does charity abide in him?" The holy Fathers agree that he who does not give to the poor what he can give according to his state, is stealing from them and commits an injustice in their regard.

St. Thomas says that we are obliged to give alms to the poor on two occasions: when a poor man is in extreme necessity, and when one has more than is needed to provide for oneself and one's family. One is then obliged to give alms under pain of mortal sin. We cannot dispense ourselves either from giving alms when we have more than we need to provide for the requirements of our state, when a pauper is in considerable necessity, even though not in extreme need.

Although almsgiving is usually understood as being the distribution made to the poor of temporal goods, we can say that there are two kinds of almsgiving: corporal, the kind we have been speaking about, which aims at remedying the pauper's indigence and the misery he is suffering in his body; and spiritual almsgiving, which is bestowed when we bring succour to our neighbour in his spiritual wants and needs. All are not in a position to give material help to the poor, but all can help them spiritually by contributing to their salvation either by good example, or by procuring for them or imparting to them religious instruction. Pastors and those in charge of teaching others, are particularly obliged to do this, as are those who are bound to labour to bring about their neighbour's sanctification and salvation" (pp.138-140).

4. Fifth commandment of the Church:

Among those dispensed from fasting are "the poor who are not able to afford a decent meal that would make it possible for them to bear the fast or continue it" (p. 158).

5. Avarice:

"Not giving alms to the poor" is listed among a miser's sins. On the other hand, to overcome avarice the remedy recommended is to "love the poor and willingly give them alms according to one's ability" (p. 172).

6. **"Oppression of the poor"** is one of the sins that "cry out to heaven for vengeance" (p. 182).

7. **The fourth work of mercy** is "helping the poor affectionately" (p. 189).

8. The first beatitude:

"The first is: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit', that is, those who are poor in heart and affection, 'because the Kingdom of God is theirs'.

The poor in spirit are the humble, who do not presume upon themselves, those who detach their heart from all affection for earthly goods and attach it solely to God; the Kingdom of God is theirs, for it is certain that if they die in this state they will possess Heaven".

COMPARISON WITH THE SOURCES, JOLY and LE COREUR

Of the nine passages of **Duties I** which treat of the poor, only the one referring to the life of Jesus is without a parallel in Joly or Le Coreur. Seven of the references are more or less literal transcriptions from one or other of the sources. The only notable exception is the reference to almsgiving. I shall restrict myself to saying a few things about the passages of **Duties I** which differ from the two main sources for this treatise.

ORIGINALITY OF DUTIES I

1. Ready-made expressions

* The term "poor" is used as an adjective in La Salle's works or is part of ready-made expressions which recur frequently in his writings. Here are a few examples taken from the work under consideration: "How much he (Jesus) loved the poor" (p. 34). "Great hardness of heart towards the poor" (p. 171) "Helping the poor affectionately" (p. 189) "Are the poor in spirit, that is, those who are poor in heart and affection" (p. 190). "To love the poor" (p. 172). The Saint uses the words love, affection, heart very frequently when speaking about the poor.

2. Life of Jesus (pp.34-35)

* By writing his treatise as a continuous text, De La Salle was able to add his own shades of meaning when dealing with doctrine. To treat a topic that was as close to his heart as that of the poor without adding his own thoughts would have been impossible for him.

* The first thing that strikes one is that, from among the many virtues and qualities he could have picked on, he concentrates on Jesus' love of poverty and especially of the poor. He devotes a whole page to those who are deprived of material goods, and a whole section to "the principal persons whom Jesus Christ converted" who were likewise poor.

* He begins the page in question by surprising the reader with the following paradox: Jesus could have lacked nothing... but he always lived as a poor person. This paradox returns under various forms throughout the Founder's writings. "Our Lord was born poor and loved the poor" (MTR 10). "Throughout his life Jesus Christ gloried in the fact he was poor" (MF 179). "You (Jesus Christ) wished to have a poor profession" (EM 108) etc...

* He wanted also his Apostles, who were men "of lowly birth", to have this love of poverty and of a poor life (p. 34). Far from raising them above their social rank, as the powerful of this world do, he made them "endure very great poverty" (p. 34). De La Salle goes on to say how on frequent

occasions Jesus Christ showed his preference for the poor, by going in person to visit them, rather than the rich (p. 40).

* The passage we are reflecting on brings us inevitably to the following conclusion: the Christian finds the basis for loving the poor and poverty in Jesus Christ, who "lived poor" and who "loved the poor above all others" and for whom, as Jesus Christ says, "the Gospel was proclaimed" (MF 103). Elsewhere the Saint confirms this conclusion: "His love of the poor was extraordinary" (MF 133). "To imitate Jesus Christ who loved the company of the poor" (MF 173).

3. Almsgiving (pp.138, 139,140)

* Both Le Coreur and De La Salle include almsgiving under the heading of the seventh commandment. Joly makes no mention of it. De La Salle's treatment of the subject is more extensive, deep and detailed than Le Coreur's: it is a topic dear to him. We will omit the instances where the texts run parallel and will concentrate rather on De La Salle's originality.

* With regard to the Saint's severity with regard to those who do not give alms in extreme situations - he rarely speaks of mortal sin in his writings - he bases his doctrine on solid sources.

* The Wise Man gives him the authority to say the rich are "obliged" to help the poor "according to their means". St. John, the Apostle of love, provides him with the golden rule: "How can the love of God dwell in a person who possesses the goods of this world and seeing his brother in need refuses to show compassion?" The Fathers of the Church enable him to affirm that "he who does not give to the poor according to his means" steals from them and commits an "injustice" in their regard.

* The trustworthy teachings of St. Thomas confirm the severity of his judgment, and add the following words: "when a poor person is in a situation of extreme necessity, whoever can give him alms and does not commit a mortal sin".

* A very rich idea which is to be found only in **Duties I** is that of "spiritual almsgiving" "which is bestowed when we bring succour to our neighbour in his spiritual wants and needs. All are not in a position to give material help to the poor, but all can help them spiritually by contributing to their salvation either by good example, or by procuring for them or imparting to them religious instruction. Pastors, and those in charge of teaching others, are particularly obliged to do this, as are those who are bound to labour to bring about their neighbour's salvation and sanctification" (p. 139-140). When he wrote this, was the Founder thinking about his sons, the Brothers?

CONCLUSIONS

1. The fulfilment of the Law has its roots in love. This must be shown, however, in a concrete way which, in the case of the poor, means sharing material and spiritual riches with them. This sharing must be done with love, affection and cordiality.

2. The person of the poor can provide "reconciliation": whenever a thief does not know the person he has robbed or cannot find him, he can fulfil his duty to make restitution by giving to the poor, on the advice of a prudent confessor.

3. In spite of appearing to be a manual of theology, **Duties I** highlights the person of the poor person and the duties of a Christian towards him. This work reflects, as do his other works, the Founder's special love for the poor.