

WHY "BROTHERS" AND NOT "FATHERS"

Lay Religious for an Ecclesial Mission (8/9)

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5. A CHANGE OF DIRECTION: PRIDE OF PLACE TO THE APOSTOLIC MISSION

In dealing with the theme of the lay religious, we have shuffled three words or ideas (cleric, lay, and religious) as though they were cards; and we have asked ourselves which is the most important element in our own vocation, the lay or the religious. We have seen two possible approaches or responses. There is one more answer which is much to be preferred: instead of abstract, iron-clad classifications; instead of reducing everything to bare essentials, to responses deduced dryly from abstractions, canons, administrative structures and theological principles, we can yield pride of place to an historic vision, understood in all its profundity, that is to say, as a movement of the Spirit.

a. Life and life forms go far beyond taxonomy

To shut ourselves into tiny little pigeonholes is to shut out every new idea. For example, for centuries the radical newness of the priesthood of Christ has been changed in its very nature by the attempt to put it into the pigeonholes of the priesthood of the Old Testament or of the religions of antiquity (pigeonholes which nonetheless are quite advantageous and "dignified" for the members of the clerical "union", to be sure). On the other hand, many founders have had to struggle tenaciously against the insufficiency and inadequacy of juridical structures. The most important thing anyone can do is to respect life, to smell the flowers that bloom in all their beauty and grandeur. Labels and classifications will come in good time. And if conflicts arise, life in whatever form should not be manipulated. The nomenclature should be changed, for it has always been poor and inadequate. That is what has happened so very many times in the neat packaging of Canon Law (which, for example, even today cannot include within its embrace those Francis-

cans who do not want to be either clerical or lay, as was said almost at the end of footnote 18).

b. Primacy of mission in the Church, a move from a static Church to a dynamic Church

Often the Church has been seen as a completely formal structure, almost unalterable, a vision that is truer to the world of cut and dried definitions than to history (with the evolution and intermediate stages such a perspective requires). Recently there has been a demand for a more dynamic approach, centered above all on the mission of the Church, i.e., on evangelization.⁽¹⁹⁾ Instead of a centripetal Church, rushing in upon itself at the center, we envision a centrifugal Church, going outward from the center, building the Kingdom of God, especially among the poor. This mission unceasingly redefines and changes the public image of the Church. Consequently the theme of mission belongs properly to ecclesiology (not to missiology) and not as an appendix, but as a consideration in the treatment of the nature of the Church. Absolutely, the Church must be the sacrament of salvation, the People of God, and so on. However, this is to be achieved not by closing in on itself but by turning itself outward in the service of all humankind. That is the most important characteristic of the Church. All the rest is relative; it all comes afterwards. To sum up: it is not the Church that defines the mission but the mission which constantly defines the Church. That being so, the ecclesial mission is wherever the Spirit calls the Church, in terms of people, places and times. The needs of the world shape the Church. Primacy of place goes, therefore, to the present and to the future, and not to the past. It is not enough to rewrite the definition of the Church or to squeeze the Church into available niches; we must continue to rediscover the Church.

All of this has an ultimate meaning that is marvelous and deep beyond measure: the prime mover in the history of the Church is still, even today, the Holy Spirit, just as in the Acts of the Apostles, the first written history of the Church. And the Spirit is not about to repeat the past but will make all things new. It is therefore clear that neither the structures nor the hierarchy is the most important element. It is not true that some give the orders and others have to carry them out. Everybody, including the most exalted hierarchs, must listen to and humbly obey the Spirit, a Spirit "who can employ the humblest persons to shed light for the wise and for those established in the highest dignity." (20)

This is the ecclesiology which best fits the foundational accomplishment of De La Salle.

c. In De La Salle, the surprising and all-inclusive importance of the mission and of history

For our Saint, revelation did not end with the death of the Apostles; God went right on speaking. From that fact springs De La Salle's attentive listening, his loving and heroic fidelity. For De La Salle the central figure in his life and in the life of the Church was always the Spirit who calls without ceasing. His ambition was not to build yet another structure (to found a Congregation somehow or other) but to answer a call. Just like the greatest of the prophets, his life was to listen, to discern, to transmit, to share, to create--faithful to his time and yet rising above his time, turned always to a future in which God continues to reveal himself. It is awe inspiring to understand how, for St. John Baptist de La Salle, history is sacred history, not merely because with the passing of time men accomplished great things for God, but because

men listened attentively, and because of their faithfulness which lights the way for them. He doesn't build blindly upon earlier efforts, always poor and limited; rather, in the welter of background noise, he tunes in the voice of Providence. He doesn't want to go forward or backward in any undertaking without such guidance. It is because of this that at the end of his pilgrimage he can say something that seems all the more incredible for its clarity: it is God who has established the Christian schools. (Med 193; 194, 1: 207, 3)

The touchstone for everything is the mission. In the abandonment of the poor he reads a call from God and sets out to answer. He offers advice and help. He accepts personal responsibility. He organizes and designs. Gradually he sees the need for a community--they no longer call themselves schoolmasters but Brothers--and he sees the necessity even for a total commitment by means of a rule and vows: "Most Holy Trinity ... I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory ... and for this purpose ... to keep together and by association schools for the service of the poor ... I therefore promise and vow...." The mission is what gradually gives concrete shape to the Institute of the Brothers. Community, poverty, chastity, obedience--all come out of the need to respond more fully to the great call of the Lord, a call which was understood totally and radically. The entire Rule should be interpreted in the light of its first two chapters: the apostolic purpose of the Institute; and the spirit of faith and zeal. It is also from this spirit and purpose that comes the deep and strict unity of all the elements of the Brother's life, unlike any other religious congregation. (21) The Saint says, for example: "Make no distinction between the duties proper to your state and the matter of your salvation and perfection. Consider it certain that you shall never work out your salvation nor advance in perfection as when you are carrying out as well as possible the duties of your state, provided that you do so for the purpose of obeying God." (22) "It is not enough that you know yourself to be true servants of Jesus Christ; you must furthermore procure that your students know him and adore him also." (Med 182, 3) "The more you love them (the poor), the more you will be of Jesus Christ." (Med 173, 1) (The Brother must) not be of this world (Med 143, 1; 144, 1) but must be present in it apostolically. (Med 69, 3) In short, the Brother is an Apostle but to be more fully an Apostle, he consecrates himself entirely to God in the religious life; a religious life which is essentially apostolic, both in its greatest depth and in its daily round of activities. The Institute has not been created for the Brothers but for the Church (to build up the Kingdom of God and thereby achieve its own sanctification).

d. The Brothers retain their lay status in order to be better Christian educators

We turn now to our original question: as far as the Brother of the Christian Schools is concerned, which is his weightier and more productive side, the lay or the religious? Neither one! To change our focus, to move from the static to the dynamic, it turns out the most important aspect of the Christian brother is in his apostolic mission. It is a mission to which De La Salle gives the greatest possible importance, like an olympic athlete leaping over the language and the clerical monopolies of the age, thanks to a new, exciting link with the primary source, the New Testament. In its light, the Brothers are ministers of God, of Jesus Christ and the Church; ambassadors of Christ; they must devote their entire lives in order to give a Christian education to their students, to procure for them supernatural life in this world and eternal

glory in the next (as we have already seen in our quote from Meditation 201). "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) What more can be asked for?

Let us take another step now. In this whole matter, how does our being laymen express itself? How does our state of lay religious live itself out?

We know that the prohibition of the priesthood was clear and very strict: "They cannot be priests nor aspire to the ecclesiastical state, nor sing in the choir, nor dress in the surplice, nor carry out any role whatsoever in the Church." (Rule of 1705) We know that the price paid for this stance was very high: serious obstacles to a Brother's being superior (because of his lay status), dearth of priests to care for the religious needs of the Brothers and their students, endless misunderstandings It wasn't a question of legislating equality for all the Brothers; remember that there were two kinds of Brother. On the other hand, the renunciation of the priesthood presented a stark contrast to the never-ending fabrication of the myth surrounding the cleric, so characteristic of the French school in which the Saint had been trained. In short, we know that this prohibition was presented as the will of God, which had been made known in the death of Brother Henri L'Heureux. It might be said that the death of a single man doesn't teach us a great deal. But for De La Salle it was much more than a simple death; it was an answer to his search for enlightenment, to his prayers, to his personal reading done in a spirit of total submission and commitment. Furthermore, his choice of the lay state for his Brothers predated the death of L'Heureux. Definitely, for our Saint, the lay state was (in his concrete circumstances) the best way to commit oneself entirely to the Christian education of the poor by means of the conduct of Christianschools, understood as a total educational environment. (The Saint didn't legislate the teaching of catechism outside the school nor a school without catechism; he always linked religious instruction with education, piety with knowledge.) In favor of the educational mission, he prohibited all other occupations, no matter how salutary they might be in themselves; he wouldn't even allow singing in choir or helping in the church, obligations normally carried out by teachers in popular schools. The Memoir on the Habit gives us the exact justification for this decision: "The community exercises and the occupation of teaching require one's whole attention."

(19) Cf. S. Dianich, "Iglesia en misión: Hacia una eclesiología dinámica." Sígueme, Salamanca, 1988. Idem., "Iglesia extrovertida. Investigación sobre el cambio de la eclesiología contemporánea." Sígueme, Salamanca, 1991.

(20) *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1993, #2038.

(21) For example, speaking about the Franciscans, C. Bermejo (loc. cit.) states that "nothing--not a particular work nor a ministerial office--holds the brothers together as a group. They are not an order of preachers, although they do preach.... Nor are they an order of clerics, even though they can exercise a priestly ministry.... The bond which unifies them is to live as 'brothers in the Spirit'." (p. 200) "In no manner, shape or form do scholarship or a strictly ministerial apostolate appear as the end of the Order." (p. 201)

(22) *Collection*, CL 15, p. 184. The Saint applies this same norm (Blain 2, p. 318), which he had borrowed from Hayneufve, to himself. (CL 16, p. 58f)