

WHY "BROTHERS" AND NOT "FATHERS"

Lay Religious
for an Ecclesial Mission
(9/9)

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6. CONCLUSION

a. Rethinking the Christian vocation

In our daily lives we ordinarily give a great deal of importance to certain adjectives like "rich", "poor", "powerful", "weak", "intelligent", "slow", and so on. We even make these words into nouns: "the rich", "the poor", "the powerful". Nevertheless, when all is said and done, we all share equally the human condition. In other words, the noun "person" reigns supreme over all qualifiers. This is as key an idea as it is an idea overlooked and difficult to grasp. The maturity of an individual or an entire society can be gauged by this grammatical construct, the difference between nouns and adjectives.

In the Church as well, something similar occurs: we are all equally Christians. It is the most wonderful thing a person can be. That is the noun, the substantive. The other traits (lay, religious, cleric) are all adjectives, as it were, which qualify the most basic fact. They add no dignity, no importance, no privilege. Rather they are like definitions of the service rendered by each, just as the members of the body, though quite distinct, all serve the same body. (1 Cor 12:1ff)

But these ideas have some consequences which may be upsetting at first glance. In short, if the most important thing is to be Christian and if we are all equally Christian, then:

1. The word "vocation" is not the patrimony only of priests and religious. Seculars also have their vocation within the Church, with all the weight of grandeur and necessity which that supposes. To follow a call is not to seek what is greater or what is less, what I like or what promises a bright future...; it is to open one's eyes and heart in the dark night of the search for God, as the puzzled lad Samuel did, and to say truthfully to God: "Speak, for your servant is listening." (1 Sam 3:1ff) It is to do just as Jesus did in the twilight of his life: "My father,... not according to my will but according to your will." (Matt 26:39) To answer a call is to allow one's eyes to light up before the whole wide world and to take as a battle cry the inexhaustible phrase: "The harvest is great and the laborers are few." (Matt 9:37)

2. What then is the importance of a priestly or religious vocation? Inevitably priests and religious have suffered a profound identity crisis. The concept of priestly and religious vocations must be purified from deep within. Priests and religious can no longer see themselves as "privileged", "chosen", "set apart" or as members of a "clerical state". The New Testament uses the same language for all Christians without distinction. Instead of seeing themselves and being seen as "super-Christians", they are to see themselves and be seen as servants and brothers to all. This is a wonderful change! But those of us who have been formed according to the older dispensation must now do some gymnastics. We must move from the ecclesiology of inequality (some greater, others lesser) to the ecclesiology of similitude, community, shared responsibility and complementarity. This is a much more beautiful way! But it is also much more difficult. What must be accomplished is the stripping away of the myths that surround the clergy and certain ways of understanding the religious life. The Church must be declericalized. But there is something else which is much more important: seculars must be given a serious formation and they must truly feel that they are called to sanctity. Sanctity is the same for all Christians: to truly love, to achieve the perfection of charity. (LG 39-42) "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt 5:48) It must be clearly understood that the Church is not "the priests and monks". Nor is sanctity only for them. And to understand that is much more important and much more difficult.

b. Rethinking our lay vocation

Historically the meaning of our lay state emerges from our apostolic mission. The best way to understand that is not to repeat the answers given by De La Salle, but to understand and rephrase his questions; and afterwards to have the courage to formulate our own answers!

What follows can be a good shortcut for us. Start out with the Meditations for the Time of Retreat (whose great themes include: the incomparable greatness of God's plan, which calls for the salvation of all; the abandonment of the poor and the overriding importance of Christian education given in the schools; the meaning of our own vocation: to be ministers of God, of Jesus Christ and of the Church, to continue the ministry of the Apostles...). Then will come these steps or, if you will, rungs of the ladder (that is to say, the questions which St. John Baptist de La Salle had to answer): In order to realize this mission in the best possible way, is it preferable to work as individuals or in a group? In an undefined, amorphous group or in a religious community which we create? A lay religious community or a clerical community?

Theoretically, the answers can be quite varied, each one making its own valuable contribution, even if it is only to stress this or that facet. In fact, in Church history, different answers have been given: a simple association of laymen; groups of clerics; lay or clerical religious; and so on. We do not find ourselves in an area where unanimity is likely, in terms either of definitions or of structures which result from them. We are in an age of pluralism such as characterizes every historical era of change and growth. During such times there can even exist side by side institutes with very little difference between them. For example, one institute may take its inspiration from another similar one; it does not follow, however, that one of the two has no reason to exist. Each represents an attempt to answer the call of the Spirit. That is the important consideration, for in the Church, as in any family, each of the children has a place of his own, though all the children may share the same family characteristics.

In his own historical circumstances, De La Salle resolutely believed that his best answer was a community of laymen. His reasoning was not: "Given that we are lay religious, let us occupy ourselves with such and such a ministry"; but quite the reverse: "For our ministry, the best arrangement is to be lay religious." There is in this a surprising twist on the usual

way of things: many religious (at the beginning laymen, as we have already seen) went the route of ordination for many reasons, especially (perhaps) for the good of their ministry. But in De La Salle, the apostolate is the moving force for exactly the opposite, the lay state.⁽²³⁾

In our own time, we should ask ourselves the same questions and take the cue for our answers from an on-going reading of the signs of the times and of the future. We should accomplish this task with total freedom and responsibility, centered not on ourselves but on our ecclesial mission, open to the invitations of the present time and to the activity of the Spirit, while at the same time keeping a close eye on the following considerations:

- In the apostolate there are tasks and offices, but the important consideration is to live in dialogue with the God who calls, missions, and accompanies (the constant primacy of vocation over profession; the primacy of the needs of the Church over personal preferences and projects).
- True education in the Faith links human and religious growth. It speaks the language of this world and of the next world. This is the deep significance of the Christian school.
- But the school is not the only possible means to achieve that end.
- In each response, one must consider the preferential option for the poor; and the radical living out of the Gospel.

There are Brothers who wonder: Why be a lay religious when we see laymen teaching classes and administering our own schools? Good question! One really has to go further to get to the root of the matter: "To carry out this duty, would De La Salle have founded our Institute?" Just for this purpose, no! He sought to satisfy two needs, above all.

1. To care for the abandoned (those for whom no one cared); and

2. To do it with a commitment so radical that it goes beyond the normal possibilities of the secular, burdened as he is with other obligations. This is the commitment we already know about: almost heroic gratuity, community life, time, availability, immersion in the apostolate; no family of one's own, so as to be more a brother to all, especially to the poor; real poverty, voluntary and not so much a renunciation of this world's goods as a form of sharing of what one has, in a loving and fraternal relationship.... One must return time and again to these two points in order to plumb the depths of our religious vocation.

Many of the pressing social needs of the past are seen to today by the State. If we carry out a ministry in the same area, what remains to us is the radical nature of our response (and it is not simply a question of being religious; our service must be more complete and must spring from deeper motives: the Institute is not for the Brothers, but for people).⁽²⁴⁾ But there is a greater consideration still: to discover and to breathe life into all the rich and interdependent parts of the Lasallian family, above all to discover who are the most abandoned today and what areas are most in need of attention. For example, we might be "inspirers" rather than "doers"; we can open ourselves to new educational challenges (affective needs, instructional innovations, etc); we might relocate our efforts to the worst areas of marginalization; and so forth. Would that such a heartrending summons remake the image of our Institute day by day! There is a need to be re-founded continually; this is a march towards freedom which never comes to an end.... Pride of place, then, goes to the present and the future over the past. And pride of place goes to the apostolic dimension of our vocation over mere professionalism.

In his time, De La Salle's choice of lay status was not understood and brought him many difficulties. We should not be surprised that nowadays something of the same sort occurs, although surely not to the same degree, since clericalism is on the wane, at least in theory.⁽²⁵⁾ Unfortunately,

all the anti-evangelical distortions which the apostles themselves initiated (with an elbow to the ribs here or there), attempting to be noticed rather than to serve, have not totally disappeared. We have already seen this in the Gospels. (Mark 9:33-35; 10:35-44) It is only natural that those who embrace a philosophy of superior/inferior relationships look upon our lay status in terms of privation, renunciation and lower standing.... It would be a tragedy for us to look upon ourselves from that same point of view. It would be sad for us to pursue prestige as a compensation for what we "lack" (bigger and better schools, financial or academic successes, social or intellectual elitism). There is another way to see the situation, a way based on fraternity, on the grassroots equality of all Christians, responsibility that is shared, and apostolic missions which complement each other. Although no vocation is complete or sufficient in and of itself, every vocation is complete in its own order (that is, it has its own significance): "We, too, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the favor bestowed on each of us...." (Romans 12:5f)

With regard to our lay status, the same thing happens as with religious celibacy. There is no question of prohibitions, lack of ability for ordination or renunciation; it is a question only of a choice made through love: "The exercises of the community and the employment of the school require one's whole attention," according to the Lasallian text we already know. All that remains is to live out that idea to the greatest possible extent.

In summary, let us dedicate ourselves generously to our ecclesial mission. We will trust that all the rest will come in good time.

(23) For this entire theme see the already mentioned work of Brother Michel Sauvage (especially the second volume), a work outstanding for its richness and scholarship. A partial and quite brief summary of that work is found in the review *Lasallianum*, No. 2: M. Sauvage, *La finalité de l'Institut selon saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, Rome, 1965.

(24) In a certain way the religious life is more radical than the secular life style. It is "a narrower way" (LG 13); the religious consecrate themselves "in a more thoroughgoing way to the service of God." (LG 44) "...the profession of the evangelical counsels involves the renunciation of goods that undoubtedly deserve to be highly desired." (LG 46) Religious "...set out to follow Christ with greater liberty, and to imitate him more closely." (PC 1) They "...renounce" this world also (so that) they might live for God alone. They have dedicated their whole lives to his service. This constitutes a special consecration, which is deeply rooted in their baptismal consecration and is a fuller expression of it." (PC 5) "Religious, therefore, faithful to their profession and leaving all things for Christ's sake, should follow him, regarding this as the one thing that is necessary...." (PC 5)

It should also be said that a radical response to the Gospel is the spirituality of all Christians, but the response given by religious is distinct from the response of seculars.

(25) After Vatican II it would be rather difficult, for example, for the abusive behavior of a certain bishop, who denied us the possibility of teaching religion in our own schools, to be repeated. That situation was the motive for a letter (1/26/1959) directed to Brother Guillermo Félix and signed by Cardinal Valeri, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Religious. It says, among other things: "The authorization to establish a teaching congregation implies the capacity to teach religion. It is, therefore, true that by approving the Institute and its Constitutions the Church confides to it the mission of teaching every sort of discipline, even the secular disciplines (c. 1375). It is also true that the Holy See entrusts to the Institute in a particular manner and commits to it the teaching of religion, for that is the discipline which has the greatest influence in the Christian formation of youth." (See the entire text in *Sinite* 1, 1960, p. 6f) "In the Church there are many institutes, clerical and lay, engaged in different kinds of apostolic work.... In these institutes apostolic and charitable activity is of the very nature of religious life, as their own holy ministry and work of charity, entrusted to them by the Church and to be performed in its name." (PC 8)