

LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY - A CHRISTIAN JOURNEY

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I like to think of the spirituality proposed by Saint John Baptist De La Salle as a coherent body of counsels for Christian living. One cannot look upon De La Salle simply as an educator and confine him to the classroom. He certainly was an educator, but he was more than that. It is too easily forgotten that, throughout his life, De La Salle remained a priest consecrated to the glory of God. There is perhaps not enough stress on the fact that Lasallian spirituality is above all one that seeks to form true disciples of Jesus Christ. In order to see Lasallian spirituality in all its breadth one cannot limit it to the spirituality he offers his Brothers: one has to include also the plan he proposes to Catholic adults to enable them to lead a truly Christian life. Lasallian spirituality offers a complete blueprint for Christian living.

Keeping the impetus of one's baptism alive.

De La Salle is a man who thinks. He usually uses logical arguments and has recourse to common sense. This may seem to be a rather cold approach, but it is all the more solid as a consequence. De La Salle tells the Christian straightforwardly:

"You cannot belong to a religion without knowing what its implications are for you. You would not sign a contract without knowing what advantages it offered you and what obligations it imposed. You are a believer: can you say what that implies for you? You are a Catholic: it is normal for you to find out how to behave like one. If you are logical, you will not be satisfied to be a Catholic only in name. You will want to become more and more worthy of the name which makes you a very special person in the eyes of God."

Where does De La Salle say all that? Right at the very beginning of his famous work *The Duties of a Christian towards God and the means of accomplishing them*.

"To belong to a profession (in the way a person belongs to an association or is an accountant) and not to know what it is, not to know even what the name signifies and what it involves, not to know the basic obligations of one's profession, seems completely opposed to common sense and sound reason.." (Preface i, ii).

Baptism, which you received at the request of your parents, who loved you very much, gave you a place in God's family and in the Catholic Church founded on the Apostles. What effect has this had on your life up till now? What effect does it have on you now? Can you say that you have been sufficiently conscious of all this? In this connection, De La Salle speaks plainly to the Christian:

"There are Christians who are Christians without knowing what it is to be one. Very few take the trouble to be instructed in what is needed in order to live well (as Christians)" (Preface).

Clearly De La Salle is describing the situation prevalent in his own day. Is not our own situation somewhat similar? It is strange how we like finding out information about lots of things, and yet we take for granted that we are Catholics, and make very little effort to learn what this dimension of our life implies for us. It is probably a good thing for a saint like De La Salle to challenge us forcefully about this.

An adult's point of view

De La Salle invites us to look at the path we have taken with adult eyes. There are many adults who should follow some sort of refresher course on their baptism in order to understand and appreciate it more. This is

much more useful than letting yourself be told all kinds of nonsense by the first guru you meet, who tells you immediately "to be born again" and accept Christ in your heart in order to be saved. But you've already been totally saved, Old Man! You were redeemed by Christ well before you ever asked to be, and well before all those incoherent Gospel peddlers came into this world.

God was the first to love us, before all the preachers in the world. Jesus redeemed us all. The Catholic baptism you received made you for ever and ever a Son of God. By the very fact it happened it was a success. If you are 16 years old, then your baptism into the Catholic faith has been successful and perfect for the last 16 years. If you are 50, then you became a Son of God 50 years ago. You are saved, but perhaps you haven't lived as if you were saved. Be born again? Come on! It's already happened for you. You were re-born of water and the Holy Spirit through the baptism the Church gave you. Jesus himself wanted it to happen in this way. There is nothing more to be done here. His Church, his only true representative, was there to serve you in the name of Jesus himself.

It is marvellous to see that De La Salle bases himself on Jesus' words to Nicodemus when he wishes to speak of the effects of baptism: baptism makes us Christians, it makes us saved. De La Salle goes on to say:

"It is baptism that confers on us the status of being 'saved' That is why Jesus clearly says in the Gospel that if a person is not born again of water and the Holy Spirit he cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven" (p. 211).

What remains for you to do is to look at the way you live as a baptised and saved person with the eyes of an adult. You are the one involved in this and all the decisions are yours. Who can help you to look at things a bit more closely? De La Salle is a doctor of theology. During his lifetime he was as fervent and committed a priest as the Curé d'Ars or Don Bosco in the 19th century, or Cardinal Léger and Fr. Popieluszko, the priest martyr in Poland, or any other apostle you know.

Baptism is important but it is not everything. It's not enough to have your membership card to be a better member of your association. De La Salle insists:

"To belong to the true religion it is necessary to be a Catholic, to believe in God, in Jesus Christ and in all he has taught us himself or through his Church. It is necessary also to make a public declaration of one's beliefs. "

De La Salle goes even further:

"It is necessary likewise to be animated by the Spirit of Our Lord and to lead a life modelled on his own and on his teachings which we find in the Gospel and throughout the New Testament
(Preface iv).

Taking responsibility for myself

It is not easy to live out one's baptism. Personal commitment is called for. De La Salle invites us to go beyond the kind of religion that is very personal and practised in secret. He seems to think along the same lines as Jesus that "you don't light a candle to put it under a bushel". We are not surprised to hear him tell us, with a touch of psychological insight:

"People do not normally realise what they think till they express their thoughts in words"
(Preface, p. v).

Nowadays, people freely express their opinions through the various media outlets. Why should Christians be timid and afraid to declare what they are? Louis Veuillot wanted Catholics to be proud of admitting their faith. Am I going to be one of those Christians who are afraid to state their convictions openly ? If so, I

would be far indeed from De La Salle's daring and zeal. He encourages us to give external signs of our religious convictions, not through a superficial desire to get ourselves noticed, but because, as he says:

"There must be some exterior signs that distinguish Catholic Christians from those who are not."
(ibid.)

The external signs of our faith that we are talking about here are going to mass, receiving the sacraments, listening to the Word of God in church, attending prayer services, observing practices recommended by the Church. Here too, De La Salle appeals to the common sense of his reader:

"It is difficult for a person not to belong to a group, and even more so to a religion, if exteriorly he does what the others [in the group] do, and does not dispense himself from doing things which cannot be done without much effort." (ibid.)

This approach reflects that of Pascal in the 17th century who recommended people to behave as if they were believers in order to become believers. This is basically what psychologists speak of when they say "ideas lead to actions" or "you become what you think".

There is, of course, the risk of being satisfied with external signs. This is obviously not what De La Salle wants. He insists that behind every external sign there should be a personal conviction. He does not, however, praise the value of hidden virtue to the extent of dispensing himself from the need to give visible signs that reveal his profound faith. De La Salle urges his readers to follow the great examples of history and show their faith by the sign of the cross. For his examples, he turns to Tertullian, Jerome, Cyril and Ambrose. He does not forget to stress the importance of joining personal conviction to the external sign:

"the sign of the cross should not be made out of habit or for form's sake: it should be made with faith, respect and with a truly interior devotion." (ibid.)

It may be thought that there is nothing particularly striking that makes it worth talking about making the sign of the cross. And yet, have we not all come across groups using signs, badges and passwords in order to recognise their members? What is more, the sign of the cross is a summary of the whole creed: it recalls obviously the death of Christ, but also his resurrection. It recalls the mysteries of the creation, Incarnation, and the coming of the Spirit. The sign of the cross is a summary of our faith and a way of praising God that is intensely concentrated. This is surely the sign par excellence of the baptised Christian. As Christ said to his Apostles: "Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 28,19). And so, we should not forget the close link between the sign of the cross and that of the baptised Christian, even if our Christian life is far from consisting solely in making this external and visible sign.

Son of God, brother of Jesus: where, how, why?

Jesus wanted baptism to produce extraordinary changes in us. Baptism removes original sin in us, and all other sins committed before baptism, if this is received after the age of reason has been reached. Baptism makes us children of God, members of the Church and of the mystical body of Christ, and living temples of the Holy Spirit. These are truths that De La Salle reminds us about. He refers also to the great dignity conferred on Christians:

"The grace of God communicated by baptism makes us children of God. This grace makes us share in the holiness that is God's nature. By giving it to us he adopts us as his children. He also gives us a guarantee that, if we keep it, we shall be heirs to his glory in Heaven.

"When we receive baptism, we have the happiness also of becoming children of the Church. It is then that we acquire the right to share in all its riches and, in particular, to apply to ourselves the

merits of Jesus Christ by the use of the sacraments. All Christians share in them according to the degree that God's love and grace live in them."

At the same time as Satan is driven from the soul by baptism, so the Holy Spirit takes possession of it: we become the temples of the Holy Spirit.

"We receive also the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and baptism unites us to him in a way that is so special and intimate that, as soon as we receive it, God looks upon us as members of (the mystical body) of his Son made Man." (p. 213).

These are very great truths. They are also perhaps so familiar that they no longer affect us as strongly as they should. We need to take in fully the extent of our human misery and observe the sordid actions of some people, in order to realise the distance that separates the benefits brought to us by baptism from the baser instincts, which still struggle to gain the upper hand in what St Paul calls "the old man with his vices and desires". He refers to the same thing when he speaks of the "old leaven": "Purify yourself of the old leaven ... so as to become a new paste". A baptised person is like someone who has risen from the dead, who has been given a new life. This is the image St Paul uses to give us an idea of the greatness of baptism. Death/baptism - Resurrection/new life. This has been a part of Catholic teaching since the days of the Apostles. It remains valid today as a way of showing us the consequences of our baptism.

Baptism is a liturgy or an initiation rite. That is to say, it is a rite of admission into a society, the society of the Church. If the person baptised is an adult, the reception of the sacrament is preceded by a period of serious preparation. He has to study the truths of the Catholic faith, consider deeply the reasons for the step he is taking, and to make a personal commitment to live a life based on the practice of Gospel values. This personal commitment is important. De La Salle stresses it with an insistence that is surprising in the monolithic France of the 17th century. This holy priest reminds of a basic truth: "One can be a Christian only by free choice". He does so in order to show that, if a person belongs to the Church founded by Jesus Christ, it is because he wants to, by the grace of God. "One can be a Christian only by free choice" (p. 228). He then adds: "God does not force anyone to be one " (p. 229).

We find ourselves now in the land of the "freedom of the children of God" spoken of by St Paul. Now that we are fully aware of what baptism means for us, we accept it freely. Now is the time, in a manner of speaking, to "return to my mother's womb", to go back to the source of my baptism, and freely to make a commitment to renounce the devil and all his deceits, and to set out along the path traced out by God. This will not be easy, however. There will be many invitations to stray from it. But the grace of my baptism gives me confidence in the strength of the Holy Spirit who supports me. When I was baptised, I was anointed with oil. This was meant to be a powerfully symbolic act. Oil is absorbed by the skin, it strengthens the body, it cures certain wounds. Just as in former times, athletes rubbed oil into their skins to prepare themselves for the fight, so the oil that anointed me represents my preparation for the fight to keep Christ as the sole master of my life and, as De La Salle says, "to prepare us to fight strenuously against the enemies of our salvation " (p. 224).

Conclusion

To become aware of one's identity is the first requirement in order to assert oneself and to develop. This is a law that De La Salle applies to Christian life. To follow the teachings of St John Baptist de La Salle is first and foremost to follow the teachings of the Christian faith. St La Salle devoted his whole life and energy helping young people and adults to learn how "to become true disciples of Jesus Christ. It is through baptism that one begins to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is through it that we must become fully aware of the deep-seated Christianity we must develop within us.

The starting point of Lasallian spirituality, both for the Christian and the religious, is the fact that their lives are deeply rooted in their baptism. This is something the Founder reminded his Brothers about when he spoke to them about the pupils they had to teach: "By baptism, these children. are, like you, consecrated to

the Most Blessed Trinity" (Med. 46, 3). And so it is that, as far as the fruits of their baptism are concerned - a baptism that incorporates them into the Church as the People of God - both Brothers and lay people are following the same spiritual path.