

LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY: A LIVING CHRISTIAN FAITH (2)

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The Words of Jesus nourish our faith.

The Word of God, especially the New Testament, is an ever present source of inspiration, which can increase our knowledge of Jesus, of his Father and of the Holy Spirit, and thus increase the dimension of faith in our everyday lives. Our Christian spirit will be fuelled by the truths of Scripture through its radical questioning and through its paradoxes to which Jesus holds the key. It is there that De La Salle sends us to draw upon the spirit of Christianity. The spirit of Christianity and the spirit of faith are one and the same. When you choose the spirit of faith, you choose a Christian life enlightened by faith. That is one of the major aspects of Lasallian spirituality. De La Salle recognises you as one of his disciples, if you are guided by faith, by "perspectives" of faith, by "motives" of faith, by judgements which are in agreement with God's "criteria" in Scripture. If you have no faith, you are missing an important dimension of Christianity and you become a cause for concern in the eyes of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. He is quite categorical on this point, and he uses Saint Paul's expression: "The just man lives by faith " ... which is the same as saying: "The Christian (the one I recognise as such), lives by faith." Anyone who does not enter into the world of faith has not yet found the road which leads to God.

De La Salle is always a precise theologian. It is true that in reality he never abandons a pastoral attitude which is full of patience. Nonetheless, he is not a man who is inclined to compromise or equivocation. I can imagine him saying in the words of André Frossard: "God is God, for God's sake!" If he invites the Christian to a living faith, it is not in order to take away his doubts.... it is to engage him fully. For De La Salle, a faith which is taken seriously can lead to the "sacrifice of everything honour, health and life, for the glory of God in imitation of Jesus Christ in accordance with his words: "If anyone wants to be my disciple, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt 16, 24 in the Collection, CL 15, p. 155).

Spirit of faith, Spirit of Christianity, Spirit of Jesus

De La Salle wrote at length on the spirit of Christianity, or the Christian spirit. He knew that it starts "in the head ... !" as the saying goes. That means that the values are accepted by the mind and direct our lives. If the habits of thought are marked by a Christian vision, then one's way of life will be Christian. "It is the spirit of Jesus Christ which should guide all our actions to make them holy and agreeable to God", and he quotes Saint Paul to the effect that "as we must live by the spirit of Jesus Christ, we must also conduct ourselves in all things by the same spirit". (Gal 5,5, and the Règles de la Bienséance, II).

We see elsewhere the forthright reasoning of Saint John Baptist de La Salle the logician: "There would be little use in being enlightened by the light of faith, if you did not live according to the spirit of Christianity". Basically, he is telling us: there is no point in being satisfied with having insights about the faith, you must put them into practice. So an imperative such as: "Live your faith", is something utterly Lasallian. To have the spirit of Christianity, is "to live according to the maxims or recommendations of the Gospel". De La Salle develops this theme clearly: "The main aim of faith is to do what you believe in, (to act according to faith), and that is why Saint James says that faith is dead if it is not accompanied by good deeds. "You believe, adds Saint James, that there is only one God; you are right; the devils believe that too, but man is justified by his deeds and not by faith alone" (Jas 2, 17, 19).

In the same breath, De La Salle gives the profound secret of a sure faith: "Be certain that the main conversion is one of the heart, without which conversion of the mind is utterly sterile" (MF 175. 3, on Saint Denis). This goes further than the idea mentioned above: "It happens in the head". This time De La Salle seems to be telling us that it occurs "in the heart". He is undoubtedly correct.

Faith is not simply a matter of the head, it must also be heartfelt, taken to heart. So De La Salle is right to tell you, for example: "If you strive to increase your faith, let it be to increase the quality of your Christian commitment". He uses 17th century vocabulary, but his real meaning and intention is evident when he writes: "If you are concerned to increase your faith, let it be so as to increase your piety" (MF 175, 3). The essence of piety as understood here by De La Salle, does not lie in pious devotions, but in a committed life, a life which conforms to the Gospel.

De La Salle does not expect Christianity to come cheap. Consequently, he is able to throw down challenges like the following: "Are you ready, like the first Christians, to die in order to prove the greatness of your faith? Would you prefer to lose heaven and the grace of God to avoid suffering?" (MF 84. 3). We know that several of his spiritual sons in Spain and in France did not hesitate to spill their blood for their faith. They were imbued with the teaching of faith of their guide. These were unusual situations, but daily life also challenges us to give witness.

"How do you show that you have the spirit of Christianity?" De La Salle asks again, anxious to awaken our sincerity. "Be convinced that to possess it your actions must not contradict the faith you profess and must be a keen expression, (a lively manifestation), of what is stated in the Gospel" (MF 84 3).

For De La Salle, you are people of faith, if you use the eyes of Jesus to look at things. Jesus said, "The eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body will be in the light" (Mt 6, 22; Lk 15, 11.33). De La Salle requires this vision of faith in relation to events, people and things: "Do not look upon anything but with the eyes of faith", that is to say according to what God tells us by his Word, Jesus. We are aware that many people allow themselves to be swayed by the prevailing culture, by advertising slogans, from which they derive their criteria for judging. In De La Salle's eyes, the Christian takes his criteria from the Gospel, from Jesus' way of seeing things.

De La Salle wants the one who lives by faith to be completely at the service of God. Such a one is at the service of no one else, knowing that God alone is worthy to be loved and served. Everything that this person does, is done "in view of God", with the desire to collaborate in God's plan for them and the world. Faith makes a person co-operate with God's plan.

De La Salle wants us to be aware that God is active in this world, that God is present at every moment of our existence. You are this man or woman of faith, when you read the thread of your existence in the light of this action of God in your life. "Attribute everything to God", like Job who declares: "The Lord gave me everything, the Lord has taken everything away, blessed be his name". Close to, we do not understand very well what is happening, but we are persuaded that God is acting in our lives as in the lives of all people who collaborate in his plan. God is at work in your life in a way that you possibly do not know. Why do you not learn to be aware of his presence even more?

That is how the Christian lives who has the spirit of Jesus and of Christianity. At the same time, he can be assured that in this way he is walking in the true Lasallian spirituality. Like many spiritual directors of his time, De La Salle wanted to underline faith as the fundamental virtue, a virtue which lays the basis of Christianity. If we adopt the spirituality proposed by La Salle, we will be led to put faith at the heart of our Christianity, to enlighten it and animate it by a faith inspired by charity!