

Introduction

by
Miguel Campos, FSC

Condensed with permission from the introduction to *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's College Press, 1975).

1. Development of the Text

History of the Text

Among all the writings of John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* has had an unhappy history. His other works have enjoyed from the beginning a much greater popularity. Those dealing with the professional functions of the Brothers were the most frequently published: *Les Règles de la Bienséance*, *Conduite des Écoles chrétiennes*, *Devoirs d'un Chrétien envers Dieu*, *Instructions et Prières*. Similarly those dealing with the ascetical principles of the Brother's life had many editions: *Les Règles communes*, *L'Explication de la Méthode d'Oraison*, and *Recueil*. All these writings undoubtedly made a profound impression on the minds of the Brothers. However, it must be recognized that very often a fundamentalist understanding predominated in the interpretation and the reading of these publications, although there is no question that such an approach did not prevent an element of creativity in the history of the Institute, clearly demonstrated in the well-known variety of educational projects developed by the Brothers. This creativity, it must be admitted, was occasionally impeded by a fidelity to the letter of the text, with its limited perspectives. There was also a focus on the practical and the more observable elements of the writings and an emphasis on precise compliance, which often resulted in a loss of relevance to contemporary needs.

Meditations for Sundays and Feasts, however, even though the book was used almost daily and was frequently cited in the official circulars of the Institute, suffered from the routine or superficial method in which the meditations were employed. They served very often to illustrate only the spiritual thought of the present moment. The fate of *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* was even worse. Although re-edited several times and prescribed by the Rule to be read during the annual retreat, these meditations somehow remained in the dark for most Brothers. It is a fact that there is no reference to these meditations in any General Chapter from 1717 to 1901, that is, from the Chapter just before the death of the Founder up to and including the one held in 1901. Similarly, except for one volume of circulars during the generalate of Brother Joseph (1884–1897), any reference to these meditations in the official circulars of the Institute is extremely rare. Somehow, despite the great attachment of the Brothers to all the writings of De La Salle, *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* has been hardly known.

Several recent publications have led to a change of attitude regarding Lasallian studies. First there was the doctoral dissertation of Brother Michel Sauvage, *Catéchèse et Laïcité* (Paris: Ligel, 1962). With-

out overlooking the other writings of De La Salle, this dissertation focuses on *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* as central to Lasallian thought. Brother Michel's very systematic study of the New Testament citations in these meditations furthered a rediscovery of the depth of meaning in this work of the Founder. Another very thorough study, that of Brother Luis Varela, also throws considerable new light on the role of Holy Scripture in Lasallian spirituality (*Biblia y Espiritualidad en San J. B. de La Salle*, Salamanca: Sinite, 1966).

Through such studies *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* was rediscovered. The 1966–1967 General Chapter made several references to it; more significantly, these references, especially in *Declaration on the Brother in the World Today*, inspired the general determination of the Chapter to have the Brothers of today understand and live the charism of De La Salle. Both this understanding by the Chapter and *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* are the focus of this writer's doctoral dissertation, *L'itinéraire Évangélique de Saint J. B. de La Salle et le recours à l'Écriture dans ses Méditations pour les Temps de la Retraite* (*Cahiers lasalliens* 45 and 46, 1974).

The rediscovery of these meditations coincides with the effort to rediscover the original spirit of the Founder, the task attempted by the 39th General Chapter of the Institute in response to the call of Vatican Council II for the renewal of the religious life. The Council declared that true renewal must be a return to "the original sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community . . . under the influence of the Holy Spirit" (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 2).

This renewal is not carried out by some kind of fidelity to the past or to a collection of citations from the writings of the Founder. It is, instead, the fidelity of a community of men seeking to hear the call of the Holy Spirit in the needs of the world and of the Church in their own times and seeking to discern the gifts of the Spirit to use them to give witness, in turn, to the good news of the kingdom of God in today's world.

A constant tradition in the Institute and a critical analysis of internal evidence leave no doubt about the authenticity and the content of these meditations. The precise date of composition has not been definitively established, but Brother Michel Sauvage has shown that De La Salle made use of a translation of the New Testament that was not available prior to 1707. There is also evidence that these meditations were composed toward the end of his life. They are the work of a mature person speaking of what he has lived through "after long experience," as is expressly stated in the introduction to the first edition.

Sources of the Text

The literary sources of *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* have not been systematically studied. It is certain, nonetheless, that De La Salle was influenced by the concerns, the ideas, and the experiences of people of his time who were engaged in the reform of schools, especially those who were involved in the training of teachers.

Despite evidence of some limited literary influences, the amount of scriptural citations in the meditations and the altogether personal way in which Holy Scripture is cited encourage us to affirm that Holy Scripture, especially the writings of Saint Paul, is the principal source of *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*. The citations of Saint Paul are, in fact, so literal that “we must presume that the Founder worked with a New Testament constantly at hand and copied out certain passages directly” (Brother Michel Sauvage, *Cahiers lasalliens* 1:36–37).

Among the publications during the time of the Founder, one has often been proposed as a possible source because of its structure and content: *Meditations*, by Father Giry, written especially for the Sisters of the Charitable Schools of the Holy Infant Jesus for the time of their retreat and published in 1696 in Paris. The influence of this work of Giry on *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* is clear, but his citations from Saint Paul have a meaning that is entirely different from what is characteristic of De La Salle’s use of Saint Paul.

There are sixteen meditations in the work by De La Salle, two for each day of the eight-day annual retreat. They present a synthesis of thought, and their style is conditioned by language that is often rigorous in its simplicity. There is nothing of the pious homily in these meditations. Their plain and direct manner has led Brother Michel Sauvage to state:

Their language is even austere; their style, without any effort at grace. Yet in studying them, it becomes clear that they present a very coherent doctrine, well thought out over a long period of time, each word carefully chosen to carry its full weight, so that analysis is difficult and synthesis practically impossible (*Catéchèse et Laïcat*, 558–59).

It could be said that De La Salle has finally come to understand, perhaps fully and all at once, the direction that God has given to his life; God goes before him, calls him, and urges him on. Because the meditations form a work that is tightly structured, it would be a mistake to read them as an historical treatise or as a theological synthesis. The book is simply a collection of meditations, and it is for the time of retreat.

The annual retreat is a special time of the year when the Brothers consider their life in its entirety in order to get a better grasp of its meaning and its orientation before God. At this special time, the focus in the mind of De La Salle is on the *work* of the Brothers, that is, on everything that makes up the substance of their day-to-day existence. His purpose is not to provide some examination of conscience on their duties as teachers but rather to discover their spiritual, charismatic identity in the roots of their calling, which is the ultimate purpose of their life.

The main force and focus of the meditations is God, the living God, who calls, who chooses, who sends on mission. It is the God of mystery, whose saving love for everyone has been realized in Jesus Christ and is revealed visibly in the Church by an ecclesial ministry through men who are sent, like the angels, with a special charismatic gift. This gift is put to work in humble actions that must wait in patience for their full achievement. De La Salle constantly appeals to the Brothers; he continually addresses them in the second personal pronoun, *you*. This appeal is aimed at a dialogue, not with him but with the living God. When this happens, a Brother realizes that the story of his own life has meaning only in relation to the one great plan of God's saving action for all humanity.

2. Content of the Meditations

Recent studies have shown us the framework for reading *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*: a Brother hears in the meditations an echo of his own life. In this introduction we will see that these meditations are, *first*, inseparable from the way of life that De La Salle chose under the influence of the Gospel, his own story; *second*, a call to the Brother to express his own life, his story; *third*, a celebration of the mystery of God's love. Finally, these meditations throw the light of the Scriptures on the way of life of the Brothers in radical relation to the work of God visible in action, in history.

THE LIFE STORY OF JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

We cannot appreciate *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* unless we have an understanding of the interplay of the Gospel and the events

of the life of De La Salle, the full human and Christian dimensions of the course he chose to follow, and the direction and quality he gave to his life in the light of his relationship with God. Only when we see the language of the meditations, in spite of its limitations, in the context of the life he lived can we begin to appreciate the rich meaning they had for him and that he intended to convey to the Brothers.

For this we must avoid any oversimplifying of the events of the Founder's life. Instead, we must enter into his itinerary and read the facts of his life in the light of certain autobiographical documents to grasp in his own language how he understood these facts (*cf. Cahiers lasalliens*, 45:77–89). We let De La Salle speak for himself and tell his own story.

A complete historical biography of De La Salle, written according to this method, would be of monumental proportions; therefore, in this introduction we restrict ourselves to four events in his life: *vocation*, *commitment*, *growth*, and *conflict*. These events are at the heart of the critical decisions that De La Salle made in favor of the teachers and the Christian Schools.

In these four key events, we can discover the convergence of previous events in his life: his doubts and hesitations, the turning point in his resolution of the conflicting issues, and the interaction between John Baptist and his Brothers, on the one hand, and with the institutions and the civil and ecclesiastical authorities he had to confront, on the other. In each case we see an option that takes shape, is affirmed, and becomes an action.

These events are not studied as four isolated, unhistorical moments but as indicators of the powerful currents in the history of a person, presented in accord with the profound significance of the Pascal mystery, the Resurrection of Jesus.

Vocation

Through specific acts De La Salle made the decision to accept God's call to work for the Christian Schools. All his biographers cite, with more or less accuracy, a memoir written by the Founder about the first years of his new Community. This autobiographical document helps us understand God's call and De La Salle's response.

Commitment

De La Salle made a precise and irrevocable commitment to a project that he recognized and accepted in the light of the Gospel. He vowed all his powers to the work of establishing and consolidating the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Two documents

help us understand better the Gospel significance of these acts: *Memorandum on the Habit*, written to defend the garb, the existence, and the autonomy of the Community, and the *Formula of Vows* of 1691 and 1694, which shows us beyond any doubt the Paschal dimension of the commitments through which he lived and which he affirmed, celebrated, and organized in a project that responded to the needs of the world.

Growth

De La Salle then undertook to extend and to consolidate the work of the Christian Schools (the third event), which he understood as the work of God. In this we can understand how he realized his charism in its fullness, a gift of the Spirit that he had clearly seen in the beginning (the first event) and that led him to organize a Community for a mission (the second event). The document that helps us understand the profound meaning of the acts of the third event is De La Salle's *Rules That I Have Imposed on Myself*.

Conflict

There were conflicts that impelled the Founder to let go of his authority over the Institute and to decide, first, on a period of absence and then on a total surrender of the role of Superior, all in order to guarantee the consolidation of the work without him. There were tensions and problems provoked within the Community of the Brothers by both external and internal causes. The Christian Schools were not organized within the framework of the educational structures of the time, and certain people were proposing different forms of government for the Community. The ultimate consolidation of this work of God was not through constant victories toward a grand triumph at the end of De La Salle's life. Rather, what began in a radical incarnation, he learned, was destined to lead him to a total emptying of self (*kenosis*). The document that helps us interpret this experience is the letter of the Brothers, written to him on April 1, 1714, asking him to return from the South of France to resume his role as Superior. While not an autobiographical statement, it must have touched the heart of his experience profoundly at that time, for it led him to return to the government of the Community more determined than ever to achieve total self-effacement before his death in order to confirm the consolidation of the body of the Society.

MEDITATIONS FOR THE TIME OF RETREAT: A CALL

Meditations for the Time of Retreat is a call to the Brothers to express their own personal word, their own history. These meditations are, in fact, all written in the second person, something that is not always the case with the meditations written for Sundays and feasts. They are addressed in a very special way to the Brothers, to each of the Brothers in the Community. The communitarian perspective is hardly evident at first sight, but the absence of the term *community* is only apparent. De La Salle is speaking to each of his sons, insofar as he is a part of this group of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, of this Institute, of these men associated to give themselves freely to the establishment of Christian Schools in the service of the young who are most neglected. Furthermore, the words of De La Salle are announced in an active Community assembled for its annual retreat. If it is true that the Founder presumes this communitarian reality, it remains, nonetheless, true that his challenge is addressed to each of the Brothers personally, for the Community exists only in the measure that each of its members has been taken over by God, is realizing his responsibility for the salvation of the young, and turns, then, in prayer to God, who calls him, sends him, supports him, and judges him.

Meditations for the Time of Retreat does not provide the Brothers with an historical summary of the origins and the formation of the Institute. It does not give the Brothers a summary of their identity in the Church or of the purpose of their ministry. It does not seek merely to build up the Brother's ego. If these meditations do succeed in making the Brothers more aware of the dignity and the value of their work, it is not because they provide any recipes for carrying out that work effectively.

These meditations go to the heart of the life of the Brothers by inviting them to consider, in the spirit of faith and zeal, the lived experience of their Institute, the experience of God discovered in their own day-to-day relations with students. When De La Salle invites the Brothers to consider their work in the Christian Schools, he is not engaging them in considerations that are historical, theological, or pedagogical. He is not urging the Brothers with abstract reasons derived from theological or pedagogical theories, nor even from the Bible. Rather, he invites the Brothers to deepen their understanding, through contemplation and prayer, of the purpose of their being Brothers, not *what* they are living for but *for whom* they exist as Brothers. The Founder is helping them both to study the substance of their daily experience in the educational service they provide and to see the Gospel dimensions of this service and of all that it demands.

At the same time that he is focusing a Brother's attention on the concrete details of his life, helping him understand better that his way of life with his students constitutes the center of his religious experience, De La Salle invites the Brother to break through space and time, and he reveals to him the mystery of God at the very heart of this way of life. This opening to the transcendent mystery, far from diminishing the concrete dimensions of the Brother's existence, allows him to see with new eyes the fullness of his being—the presence of God, where God's work is visible and effective on behalf of the children of the poor. In doing all this, De La Salle is not plunging the Brother into mere introspection, a closing in on himself. Rather, the Founder is placing the Brother at the heart of the wonderful things of God within his own existence, announcing to him what the Lord is telling him today.

CELEBRATING THE MYSTERY

For the first Brothers, *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* spoke of events they had lived through together: the progressive establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools, founded exclusively and radically on the marvelous action of God in history, the mystery of God's love, and visibly realized in the creation of a Community to respond to the call of the poor, who were far off from God's saving grace.

These meditations constitute a contemplation of the mystery of the love of God revealing itself and acting in the existence of the Brothers for the salvation of the poor. This reference to the full dimension of the mystery breaks forth several times into an act of thanksgiving whose simplicity does not diminish the astonishment that is experienced in the face of the wonderful things of God. Such admiration and gratitude are by their very nature contagious.

These wonderful things of God are not presented as a history of salvation in the past, a doctrine that has been developed from Saint Paul. However solid the meditations may be from a doctrinal point of view, they never remain on the level of ideas. They seek, instead, to be in union with the living experience of the mystery of God, who has guided the Brothers, called them in their time, united them in a communion, and sent them to announce the good news of salvation.

De La Salle invites the Brothers to recognize in their own history this guidance by God. Free of any paternalism, he avoids acting for the Brothers, speaking their word for them. Instead, he calls on the Brothers to read, to live, and to speak their own response together in answer to the call of a mission in history that refers exclusively to the mystery of God. He does not want them simply to think again about