

THE EXPERIENCE OF DE LA SALLE AND OUR EXPERIENCE TODAY

We cannot read *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, even if it is one of the great texts of French spirituality of the seventeenth century, and pretend that nothing has happened between the time when De La Salle wrote his meditations and our time today.

Our Cultural Framework

It is commonplace to observe that we are living in a world of profound and rapid change, of social and cultural transformations that seriously affect our understanding of religious experience. This cultural explosion has repercussions that are especially experienced in the life of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The Brother looks upon his consecration to the Gospel in the service of education as a direct involvement in the construction of this world. In this his perspective is directed to the future, engaged as he is with the most sensitive element of society: youth. With the changes that are occurring, the young are called upon to learn not only the techniques for integrating themselves harmoniously into society but also how *to be* in an entirely new way to make society something new.

Similarly, we have been witnesses and agents of rapid changes in the understanding of what the Church is meant to be, with many models of the Church coming and going at the same time, often creating tension not only between different people but also within individuals. Religious education has probably been one of the major forces in developing new models of the Church, and yet, religious education has undergone rapid and profound changes within a relatively short period of time. We have experienced a transition from a so-called traditional method of catechesis—to know what must be believed, practiced, and fulfilled—to a kerygmatic method, and now to yet another, more dynamic concept based on a better understanding of anthropology and sustained by a more adequate theology of revelation.

Beyond all this, the spiritual experience of the individual Brother is rooted every day in the context of a school that is undergoing profound changes that call sometimes for total renovation. He is involved with youth who are often impatient and challenging. He is confronted with numerous efforts to discover completely new alternatives in the entire field of education.

The Charism of the Founder Today

Fidelity to the Founder is achieved in terms that are relational and historical. The gift of the Spirit is manifested in the life and writings of John Baptist de La Salle, but this fidelity is not to be understood as a return to the past or a literal fidelity to established structures.

On the contrary, this fidelity is lived and realized only in a community effort and in the determination of people to respond to the call of the present needs of our time. Only in this way can we share in the spirit that moved the Founder in his response in his time.

Attention to the present, remembrance of the past, and hope for continuity of the project for the future all take place within the historical process by which the Brother is progressively integrated into a Community with a specific purpose. Thus the questions of identity and purpose are inseparable and are placed in a mystic perspective flowing from the charismatic gift of an ecclesial ministry, not from any abstract or general conception of the religious life.

The question, "For what purpose am I a Brother?" becomes "For whom am I a Brother?" The Brother's spiritual way of life and his recognition of a charismatic gift are not isolated products but are united in the roots of his personal history, in the spark of his original inspiration. His way of life also continues to grow with endless vigor under the power and the light of the Holy Spirit.

His way of life is open not only to others who surround him today but to historical perspectives far more extensive: the whole spiritual dynamism of the Church, which is ever open to the continually new action of the Holy Spirit. It is in view of all this that we can better appreciate the role of *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* today

Meditations for the Time of Retreat: a Charismatic Gift

It can happen in the course of the school year that scholastic responsibilities and community problems lead to a loss of perspective that is experienced in such a deeply personal way that it cannot be expressed in any abstract generalizations. It is, of course, not inevitable that the school year always ends with a loss of perspective, but often enough, there occurs an absolutizing of our experiences, of structures, even of the manner of looking at educational functions. It can happen that the religious dimension of very concrete commitments is lost and that religious experience is cut off from the work of everyday living. This is not to suggest that the work of the Brothers leads inevitably to such a crisis. But without entering into the very personal and unique domain of such individual and community crises, a Brother becomes a Brother only for others, for a mission. This living synthesis that is made from one day to the next is never achieved. In

times of crises (crises that are revelatory) as well as in good times, the Brothers are committed to live the Gospel as a living word, not a dead one. They must seek in community to be profoundly in harmony with the Gospel in their daily actions, with the new life that unites with and gives form to the world by the power of the Spirit of the new covenant.

Meditations for the Time of Retreat questions the educator at the very heart of a spiritual way of life: the fulfillment of the ecclesial charism received for the benefit of the body of Christ growing up in the world.

Meditations for the Time of Retreat: Celebration of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit is ever active in the life of a minister endowed with a charismatic gift.

Meditations for the Time of Retreat can speak to us if we bring to our reading of them our own personal story, if we keep with us the full dimension of our personal way of life, the details of our daily existence, the people involved in these details, the words said, and the decisions made, the commitments to which we have given ourselves.

Our whole story, read in the light of these meditations, can bring us to prayer, prayer that is inseparable from our ministry, prayer that is not reduced to intervals or the powerful moments of the annual retreat. It will be a prayer that is a joyous contemplation and celebration.

- *Celebration* of a life that is lived in openness to the total Mystery of God and is developing, even by means of our most simple activities.
- *Celebration* of gratitude for the goodness of God, for his Providence, for his call, for the charismatic gift that reveals his saving action, his glory; for the mystery of Christ, who reveals himself in the saving of the young.
- *Celebration* of the joyful poverty of the minister, a poverty that comes from the very problems of the minister and his ministry, an awareness that it is God who saves, that God alone can touch hearts through the ministry of weak humans, fragile ministers; a poverty that becomes a confident beggar, asking to be filled with God's Spirit in order to be the "good news" for others.
- *Celebration* of the confidence of the minister, based on the fidelity of God, who chooses, calls, sends; confidence, because the minister is invited to place trust in the gifts of God; confidence that becomes trust in others, a commitment to affirm the best in others; confidence in the ability of the young, even the most difficult, to become free, to grow, to give themselves for the sake of others.

- *Celebration* of hope as the very origin of his commitment, as the basis for his willingness to die, as the dynamism of his tentative assurance already begun in Jesus Christ, for which the Spirit is the guarantee; hope that is also a challenge to go beyond self, to be always on the move, without compromise, challenging in himself, in his community, and in his students anything that opposes the action of the Spirit working to bring everyone to the freedom of the family of God.
- *Celebration*, then, of our own story, seen as a Paschal way of life, with its heights and its depths, as the recreating, enlightening, redeeming, freeing action of God; an action that is visible and effective in us to the degree that we are filled with the Spirit of God for others; it is a challenge to live our way of life as a continual incarnation in the flesh-and-blood world of our students, dying to oneself, a *kenosis* even to the end of our life, so that the young may have life to the full and come to the glory that is their destiny; it is a challenge to assume continually the mission of the Son of Man, of the Good Shepherd, with his power, not of authority but of service, capturing the very rhythm of the hymn to Christ in the Epistle to the Philippians, to live today the Paschal way of life, growing always in the Spirit of Christ.

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First Meditation

That God in his Providence has established the Christian Schools

193.1 First Point

God is so good that having created us, he wills that all of us come to the knowledge of the truth.¹ This truth is God and what God has desired to reveal to us through Jesus Christ, through the holy Apostles, and through his Church. This is why God wills all people to be instructed, so that their minds may be enlightened by the light of faith.

We cannot be instructed in the mysteries of our holy religion unless *we have the good fortune to hear about them*, and we cannot have this advantage unless someone preaches the word of God. For how can people believe in someone, the Apostle says, about whom they have not heard anyone speak, and how can they hear him spoken about if no one proclaims him to them?²