

ASSOCIATION AND COMMUNION (2/3)

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III. CHURCH AND SOCIETY

As from the formula of 1691, John Baptist de La Salle and his two "associates" bind themselves to give themselves totally, and without going back, to "the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools."

It would seem that many undertakings, reflections, and exhortations were centred on this theme of "society". If we refer to a meaning which was current in the 17th Century, that used probably by De La Salle, we note:

"State peculiar to certain beings, who live as a more or less numerous and organised group. "Society is the union of men, and not men themselves" (Montesquieu) (13)

"Organised and permanent group, instituted for a precise aim (Religious company or association) –Congregation –The Society of Jesus" (14).

This term will appear constantly in the formula of vows as also in the Rule. Afterwards it will be paralleled by the term "Institute", both meaning the same thing.

We observe that in the concept of "Society", certain aspects are involved which appear fundamental: organisation, union and permanence. Without doubt the notion of purpose intervenes and we will return to this later. We are far from the modern connotation of this term where it has taken on a more "material" aspect, even sometimes "commercial" or even "having a secret character".

We could also include in this term a spiritual aspect such as John Baptist de La Salle himself developed:

"His apostles and disciples being all united and assembled in the same place, and having received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, began to form a new society of faithful people, with three thousand persons whom Saint Peter converted that very day, and five thousand whom he converted a few days later. It is this society of the one same faith and of the same religion which we call "Church", for this word means a family, a society or an assembly" (15)

This "society" willed by De La Salle was indeed in the image of the Church, all the more so as it was "instituted" or "established" in order to bring salvation to children. In addition, he defines this society which the Brothers are, as being willed by God and therefore being integrated within the mission of the Church. On this matter we have only to refer to the "Meditations for the Time of Retreat".

Moreover just as the Church is animated by the Holy Spirit so too is this Society whose union is the life of the Spirit. (16)

IV. CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

The pattern of the Church and that of the Community are identical. Without affirming that every community is Church, John Baptist de La Salle emphasises that the criteria of the Community are the same as those for the Church: those constituting the primitive community based on fraternity, prayer, the breaking of bread and the sharing of goods. We should note that the term "Community" covers in this precise case the whole of the emerging Institute rather than the communities referred to as "local". We will come back over this point.

On this question we can take note of some quotations selected from among many others:

"This community can be very useful to the Church. Be persuaded however that it will not be so unless it is established on these two foundations, namely piety and humility, which will render it unshakeable." (17)

"Often pray to St Michael to have the goodness to protect this little family, this church of Jesus Christ (18), according to the expression of Saint Paul, which is our community, that he give it the means of preserving within itself the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and to all its members the graces they need to persevere in their vocation, and to procure the spirit of Christianity for all those who are under their guidance." (19)

"This was also what this saint required of all the members of his Company when he was their General. He even wished that all the houses of professed members who belonged to the Company should have no other foundation than poverty itself.

Is this the sort of foundation on which you desire your community to be built? It is a sure and unfailing foundation for those whose faith is true and who are interiorly animated by the spirit of Our Lord. You cannot do better than to base your fortune on this foundation; it is the one that Jesus Christ thought to be the most solid, and on which the holy apostles began to build the edifice of the Church." (MF 176.2.2)

It can also be noted how far John Baptist de La Salle insists on the fact that the members of the Community are animated by the same spirit, the Holy Spirit. In addition this Community is not turned in on itself but has for aim to "procure the spirit of Christianity for all those under their care".

De La Salle makes union the central point of the Community, union which brings peace, happiness and permanence, cherished as the precious gem of the Gospel...

"Since God has given you the grace of calling you to live in community, there is nothing that you should more earnestly ask of him than this union of mind and heart with your Brothers. Only by means of this union will you acquire that peace which ought to be all the joy of your life. Entreat the God of hearts to keep your heart and those of your Brothers one in the heart of Jesus." (20)

"Union in a community is a precious gem, which is why Our Lord so often recommended it to his apostles before he died. If we lose this, we lose everything. Preserve it with care, therefore, if you want your community to survive." (21)

It is in this way that the Community becomes the "lived" union...such as willed by the wording of the heroic vow of 1691. If we reread the development of this concept we see

that John Baptist de La Salle initially conceived his new foundation as a "community" in the image of the new-born Church. Confronted with necessities, he realised that things had to more structured. Following the example of other founders of his time, and Vincent de Paul seems to have been one of his inspirers, (22) he inclined towards use of the term "Society", following the conviction to act only by association. As the Institute gradually expanded, the community became the local community, that is to say, the concrete expression of association, which de La Salle renders by "together".

V. TOGETHER AND BY ASSOCIATION (ENSEMBLE ET PAR ASSOCIATION)

It seems that this expression is to be taken as a whole, that is to say that it sums up in itself the outstanding means to "keep schools gratuitously".

If we refer to the meaning of the terms in the 17th Century, *ensemble* means "one with another", and the term *association* relates directly to the term *Société*. (23)

In other words when John Baptist de La Salle emphasises association, it is understood that there is question of constituting a Society, in law very certainly, but also inspired by a very strong spiritual dynamic such as we have attempted to explain above. When he uses the term

"together", it is certainly to express the concrete place, sharing, a same mission which presupposes a personal contribution directed towards the dynamic of the whole.

To sum up, it is certainly question of a Church procedure, that is to say of ensuring a balance and a complementarity between the private procedure or commitment, and the collective procedure or commitment. In addition there is question also of a task to be done, in view of a mission inscribed within the divine Plan of Salvation, that of bringing the Salvation of Jesus Christ to abandoned youth, and in order to do this to keep schools gratuitously.

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- (13) Petit ROBERT art Société.
- (14) id.
- (15) Jean-Baptiste de La Salle DA Église105.1.2.
- (16) id., DB 113,1.
- (17) Jean Baptiste de La Salle MF 176, 2.
- (18) Rm 16,5 et MF 169.3.
- (19) Lasalliana, fiches 49-16-D-115 a 120.
- (20) de La Salle MF 176.2.
- (21) id., MF 91,2.
- (22) F. Maurice Auguste- CL n°2.p 104.
- (23) Le Petit ROBERT. –

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