

62. TRUTH

Summary:

1. General definitions of Truth. 1.1. Set up of this article. – 2. Religious truth. 2.1. God is the Truth. 2.1.1. Biblical approaches to the truth. 2.1.2. The Roman Catholic Church, basing itself on the Bible and Tradition, is the sole guardian of religious truth. 2.2. Speculative truths and practical truths. 2.3. How we find out our way to truth. 2.3.1. Through reading and study. 2.3.2. Through prayer and Meditation. 2.4. Christian teachers must form their disciples to the truths of religion. 2.4.1. Truth and the sacrament of Penance. – 3. Human truth. 3.1. Why should we be truthful in our relations with our neighbour? 3.1.1. Vocabulary used by La Salle. 3.1.2. Truth and the honest man. 3.1.3. Truth and the Eighth commandment. 3.1.4. How do teachers form their pupils to respect human truth. 3.2. To be truthful with oneself. 3.2.1. Various ways of telling lies. 3.2.2. How to be truthful. – 4. How the Founder is a model in the practice of religious and human truth.

1. GENERAL DEFINITIONS OF TRUTH

“Nobody wants to chase after error and untruth. The desire for truth is a desire as strong and active, as it is natural and necessary; but where are we to find this precious truth, for which so many long? Where does it dwell?” These are considerations and questions which his biographer places in De La Salle’s mouth (CL 8,203). The answer to the questions he asks himself is to be found in his writings as well as in the example of his life. He does not define truth at the epistemological level; he uses this word as it was used in his time. If we are dealing with knowledge, “truth is then the conformity of our judgment with what things are in themselves”. The same *Trévoux* Dictionary adds; “It is yet another maxim, an evident principle; and this is said not only of knowledge that we acquire through study or through meditation, but also in regard to the mysteries of religion” (t. VIII, 352). The absence of truth consists at once in the *error* which is the outcome of ignorance or lack of examination (t. III, 827) and in *falsehood* “When we intentionally

make someone believe a thing to be true when we know it is false or to believe false what we know to be true” (t. V, 932).

1.1. Set up of the article

In the present article, we shall examine how La Salle speaks about the truth, first on the religious level, then on the human level, in our relations with others or with ourselves. Thanks to references to his life, we shall try to show the perfect conformity between his teaching and his example.

2. RELIGIOUS TRUTH

2.1. God is Truth

On the religious level, the Founder maintains that truth is God himself (Db 23a, MR 193,1). He is the one and only true God (Da 453D, MF 168,2)¹ and “the first truth we must believe and which is the foundation of our faith is that there is

a God, that there is only one God, and that there cannot be several Gods, because, according to St. Thomas, there is only one who can be independent and possess a sovereign and infinite perfection" (Da 15B).

2.1.1. *The Biblical approach to the Truth*

The Bible speaks abundantly of the Truth. In God the Truth means that he is to be believed, he is faithful, that we can trust him and abandon ourselves to him — these are the various meanings of the hebrew word *emeth*² — and that he cannot either deceive himself (Da 3B) or be deceived (Da 12A), or want to deceive us (Db 11E). He is the God of Truth (Ps 31,6); his word (Ps 119, 160), his law (Ps 119, 142) and his decisions (Ps 19,10) are also true. This Truth expressed itself in the past through the prophets (Rm 1,2; He 1,1) and, in the New Testament, by his Son (Ib) the true Light and fullness of Truth (Jn 1,9,14). This Son, Truth itself, (Jn 114,6; MD 38,2) came to witness to the truth (Jn 18,37). Before his Passion, he promised the Spirit of Truth (Jn 15,26) to his Apostles to make them understand all that he had taught them (Jn 16,13; Da 61B). Jesus even asks his Father to confirm his Apostles in the Truth (Jn 17,17-19).

2.1.2. *The Roman Catholic Church*

Through his Apostles, Jesus has transmitted this Truth to the Church: "The doctrine which Jesus Christ has bequeathed his Church is the same which he taught, which his Apostles taught the faithful of their time and which they passed on to the pastors which came after them, either in writing or orally (Da 70E). It is therefore in the Bible and in Tradition (Da 70,8A) that are contained all the truths³ that the Church is in duty bound to transmit and we find a synthesis of them in the Apostles' Creed (Da 13C). She alone "column and foundation of the Truth" (1 Tim 3,15; Da 72C), can do it for "she alone is of the true religion, all the others usurp this name and are false and imaginary" (Da IIIE). The Founder's fidelity to the Roman Catholic Church makes him consider those he calls pagans, atheists, idolaters, infidels, heretics and schismatics (Da 68B-C-D) being "completely cut off from the Church by their errors".⁴ This position is no longer consonant with the Vatican II Declara-

tion which states: "The Catholic Church does not reject anything which is true and holy in these religions... However, it teaches and is obliged to teach unceasingly Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn 14,6). In him, men find the fullness of the religious life and God has reconciled everything" (2Co. 5,18-19).⁵ There is no doubt that this same fidelity would have enabled him to subscribe to this new approach of our times.

2.2. *Speculative and practical truths*

De La Salle distinguished two categories of religious truths: those concerning speculative faith (Da 6A), which he also calls fundamental (MR 200.1) or essential (MR 200.2) or of pure speculation (MR 194.3) and practical truths (Da 6B; MR 194.3). The word MAXIM may refer to one or the other category.⁶ The first truths are those which must be believed (Da 6A), the others "those that make us lead a Christian life conformable to that of the Apostles after the example of Jesus Christ". (MR 200.2) Without the practical truths, the speculative ones are insufficient for salvation: "It is not enough to be instructed in the Christian truths which are purely speculative to be saved... (MR 197.2). In the case of the former as of the latter, the human will does not suffice by itself: "It is quite common to see Christians even in regular communities who have little taste for the practical truths, who oppose them in their heart and sometimes in their exterior conduct" (MD 5,2). And also: "Even the most saintly, most learned and most enlightened of men are liable to fall into error and falsehood" (Da 3A).

2.3. *How we find the Truth*

However, God desiring that "all men come to the knowledge of Truth" (1 Tm 2,4; MR 7E), it is made accessible to us in various ways which match up more or less: the preaching of the Church, the receptiveness of a pure heart, as the Sixth Beatitude promises (Mt 5,8): "It is the case of those who, having their heart exempt from any vice and any affection for the least sin, are faithful only to God; they will see God, because there is no darkness in their soul which prevents them from seeing the Eternal Truths..." (Da 191D).

2.3.1. *Through reading and study*

Then, by listening to the word of God: "It is from this sacred book that you must draw the knowledge which you should daily impart to your pupils. Thus they will imbibe the true Christian spirit. But it is necessary that you, in the first place, should nourish your soul with the holy truths contained in this precious book, and that you should let them sink into your mind by frequently meditating on them" (MF 169.1). Another means is spiritual reading: "Like them (Jesus and the Apostles), you must leave your work and devote yourself to reading and mental prayer, in order to learn at their source the truths and the holy maxims which you wish to teach them..." (MR 200.1). We can also consider the book we are reading as a personal letter from Jesus. If we cannot understand their (the divine truths') meaning, we should approach those who are able to explain them to us (R 143-144). Study is another means, intellectual this time: "You must strive to attain a perfect knowledge of the truths of religion by study, because ignorance in such matters would be criminal since it would cause ignorance in those whom you should instruct" (MF 153.1) and that "you must therefore not only know these truths in a general way, but also know them all so well that you are able to make your disciples understand them clearly and in detail" (MR 198.1).

2.3.2. *Through Prayer and Meditation*

As we are exhorted to do in these passages, we must have recourse to prayer and meditation, "for Jesus Christ is in the midst of the Brothers (doing mental prayer) to teach them the Truths and the Maxims of the Gospel, to drive them into the depth of their hearts and to inspire them to make of these truths a rule of conduct, to help them understand them and teach them how to put them into practice in a way most agreeable to God and consonant with their profession" (EL 10A).⁷ To help us go deeper into these truths, we must also make acts on the truths of faith, especially if we are tempted not to believe in them (Db 288C). Being a good teacher himself, De La Salle "wrote prayers for confession which are at the same time instructions on the things most necessary concerning the sacrament of Penance, so that those who already can, when reciting them, remember these truths and, those who do not know them, would

need only to recite them to learn them easily" (I 174C). It is easy to realise that all these means which help us to find the truth are not only aimed at acquiring the knowledge of speculative truths but rather at the practice of these Truths by the genuine Christian.

2.4. **Christian teachers must educate their pupils in the truths of our religion**

Teachers, being better educated and imbued with the truths of Christianity, can transmit these truths to their pupils and help them practise them. The duty to teach is first of all the responsibility of the Teaching Church and the parish priests who are required by her to explain the Gospel «to teach parishioners the truths and maxims of religion and how to apply these truths to their daily life as true Christians" (Da 476C). It is an honour for teachers to participate in this manner in the ministry of the Church (MR 199.1). They are the representatives of Jesus Christ (MR 195.2). As such, they must not alter his message (MR 93.1).⁸ They must teach catechism every day (MR 200.1) and do so with simplicity, coming down to them by accommodating themselves to their level" (MR 198.1), "explaining the Christian truths to them in a concrete fashion, one that conforms with the limitations of their minds" (MR 197.1).⁹ The Founder is therefore always eager to combine in the minds of the children, knowledge of the truth with its practice.

2.4.1. *Truth and the Sacrament of Penance*

There is one area in which the teacher must form well his pupils to respect the Truth, that area is that of Confession. It is particularly in *L'Instruction méthodique pour apprendre à se bien confesser* (CL 17, pp. 97-172) that the Founder elaborates upon his teachings. He has placed in the hands of his teachers and their pupils a large number of books: *Instructions pour la confession et la Communion* (CL 17, pp. 175-218) to which must be added a chapter on the content of the examen of conscience (Ib. pp. 219-233). Together with a section of *Grand abrégé* (CL 23 pp. 394-406), pages 117-207 of the second volume of *Des Devoirs d'un Chrétien envers Dieu* (CL 21), the *Petit Abrégé* (CL 23 pp. 462-463), plus the text followed by

Devoirs d'un Chrétien (CL 20, pp. 279-332). Thus, we cannot but be impressed by the importance which the Founder gives this sacrament and his preoccupation to form upright consciences which do not trade the Truth.

3. HUMAN TRUTH

3.1. Why be truthful in our relations with our neighbour?

On the human relations' level, the word *emeth* often means the conformity of human speech with what is being expressed.¹⁰ "Just as the union of the spirit and the body is manifested mainly in the words through which we express our thoughts, our intentions, our deepest feelings, to communicate them to others, it follows that the truth of what is being said is an essential dimension for the human being for in falsehood the interior unity of the individual and the foundation upon which is built a self-assured existence in a human community are destroyed. What is brought into play in the eighth commandment, is the very essence and dignity of man, as well as the possibility of life in society".¹¹ The truth we owe others comes therefore within the framework of the respect due to their dignity as human beings created in the image and resemblance of God (Gn 1,26-27).¹²

Since Christ's revelation reminds us that man is inseparable from God, it is therefore not enough to know and practise truth only in our relations with God, for whoever says he loves God but does not love his neighbour is a liar (1Jn 1,6). That is why La Salle teaches us the way we must be truthful towards our neighbour. He does it, one might say, more systematically than for religious truth. His teaching is in fact condensed in the chapter on the eighth commandment in the *Devoirs d'un Chrétien envers Dieu*, (Da 141-146) in the *Règles de la bienséance et de la civilité chrétienne*, (RB 185; 216) on the manner in which the Christian teacher ought to train his disciples to tell the Truth in the *Conduite des Ecoles Chrétiennes* (CE 157; 167; 211).

3.1.1. The Vocabulary used by La Salle

In the sphere of Truth related to one's neighbour, the vocabulary employed by La Salle is very

rich. We will show our respect for the Truth by being true and genuine,¹³ in our natural behaviour,¹⁴ in our sincerity, our honesty and simplicity (there is no need here to define these words since they have the same meaning today). On the contrary, we may deviate from the Truth in various ways some of them more pernicious and damaging than others to our neighbour, such as untruth, calumny, false testimony, rash judgment, fraud, imposture and duplicity or even when we alter or falsify things, or sell at excessive prices. Other offences will affect the Truth less seriously, for example, to forge, disguise, dissimulate or feign the truth. We can also fail against the Truth through hypocrisy, ambiguity, subterfuges and trickery. We may hide it, whilst it should be said, or not say it for a variety of pretexts.¹⁵ The desire to be singled out, particularity, as well as affectation and excessively studied manners of speech will lead us away from the simplicity which suits the expression of the Truth.

3.1.2. Truth and the Honest Man

"Nothing is beautiful unless it is true", was a common saying in the XVIIIth century, or this other: "We should never move away from nature".¹⁶ The people of this period and particularly the writers, searching for "this Truth which is not that of fashion that is transient but that of reason and humanity which perdure... believe that the eternal nature of the soul is worth more in the eye of the artist than the flashes of a day".¹⁷ From the realm of the Arts and letters, this search for what is natural¹⁸ has become the ideal of the honest man who knows how "to distinguish the apparent from the real"¹⁹ as we may note in the book of the Founder *Règles de la bienséance et de la civilité chrétienne*. In this treatise which one of his biographers considers "the one which the Founder wrote with greatest care"²⁰ he describes, with the aid of numerous Biblical references, particularly from the Book of Ecclesiasticus,²¹ how the honest man must be irreproachable in the sphere of Truth, if he wishes to safeguard his honour. Through these quotations, we imagine the indignation of the author when faced with cases of untruth (RB 186B-C) and duplicity (id. 187C) and to what extent the behaviour of the liar is obnoxious (Id. 186E). It were better for the honest man to refrain from speaking rather than to offend the

Truth and harm his neighbour (RB 187C). He must also keep his word (RB 189D).

3.1.3. *Truth and the Eighth Commandment*

He is more explicit on this subject when he deals with the Eighth Commandment of God which forbids false testimony and lying. At this point, he expatiates on a teaching which could be called traditional. Besides condemning officious and pernicious lies (Db 109E), the latter causing "spiritual or material" damage to one's neighbour (Da 143A), he even condemns white lies (Da 143A), since we are bound "to always tell the truth" (Db 107C). The damage caused by perjury or by calumny must be made up for (Db 107E) in proportion to the damage caused (Da 143B). One can lie in one's actions: by cheating in weights and measures (Da 143C), by selling goods at inflated prices (Da 140C) or by falsifying them (I 229D), or very simply by cheating when gambling (RB 143C). All these sins must be the object of a rigorous examination of conscience and an avowal free from self-indulgence, even though that is accompanied by a sense of shame, for, in confession, the liar would commit a sacrilege (Da 310A).

3.1.4. *How teachers are to educate their pupils to respect human truth*

To educate their pupils to respect truth in their relations with their neighbour is very important. The Founder says that lying is one of "the most common sins that pupils may commit" (Db 183D) and one of the "five vices which should not usually be forgiven" (CE 157D). And he adds: "Liars must be punished for their lies — even the least — in order to make the pupils understand that there are no little lies in the sight of God, since the Devil is the father of lies, as Our Lord tells us in the Holy Gospel" (CE 157D-E; Jn 8,44) and "let them be pardoned rather, or punished less severely, when they frankly acknowledge their faults; they may be afterward made to conceive the horror which they ought to have of them, and they will be obliged to ask pardon humbly of God" (CE 158E). Elsewhere he writes: "Let your first duty be to inspire in them a horror for stealing and lying" (MR 202.1). In his search for the Truth, the teacher, must make use of his good judgment. He must be exacting towards the Inspector (the pupil who invigilates while the

teacher is absent from the classroom): "He must be neither frivolous nor a liar, and he must not be capable of partiality towards anyone, so that he would accuse his brothers, his friends, and his companions — that is, those with whom he associates — as well as the others" (CE 211E). Thus the teacher will inform himself of the exactitude of the accusations by asking the opinion of the "most reliable pupils". The formation of the pupils to respect truth must be focused not only on visible things but also on purity of intention so that they will behave as being in God's presence and avoid doing their good works to please men "so that these may look at them and praise them" (Mt 6,16-18; MR 202.2).

3.2. *To be true to oneself*

If there is an area where truth suffers from subjective distortions, it is that of one's own coherence between what one says is true and good and the practice of the True and the Good. It is easy to delude oneself regarding one's motivations. Contemporary research in in-depth psychology is sufficiently eloquent on this topic. However, the Founder has not waited for these discoveries to unmask the possible discrepancy between SAYING and DOING.

3.2.1. *Various ways in which we fail to be true to ourselves*

The Founder warns us against *illusions* (MF 187.2; R 172.13), *appearances of virtues* (MD 11.1) and "*pseudo inspirations*" (R 44.6) which would cause people to deviate from regular observance. *Hypocrisy* (R 172.12), *pretence* (da 278D) or *concealment in one's conduct* may slip in to simulate the good dispositions of one's soul. *Pretexts* to conceal one's conduct are other common temptations (R 49.1; MD 55.1 and 3). Through an error of judgment, one may also *overestimate one's strength* (Da 169D) and "*one's own lights*" (MD 15.3) which may be false (MD 68.2). So the Founder warns against false piety (Da 40B. 170A), false religion (Da IIID; MF 175.1), false penance (I 202D), false virtue (R 157.1), just as he does for the false joys of the world (MD 34, title). It is only rarely however that our actions are free from any taint of self-satisfaction (EM 31B; R 52.3).

3.2.2. *How to know the truth about oneself*

To know and practise the Truth about ourselves, we must receive the light of the Holy Spirit (MD 44.1), who makes us act with God in view, according to the spirit of faith (R 76.19). It is obvious that this requires a certain discernment of visible things "to know what is true or false, apparent or genuine in them; if we behave as disciples of Jesus Christ..." (MD 44.1); we need to be attentive (R 93.3-5) and to watch over ourselves (R 91.6-15). Religious regulations help one's individual goodwill by means of numerous moments during which examinations of conscience related to one's conduct are carried out (MR 205.1; 206.1; R 93.4; 153.3).

To authenticate all these procedures, the Founder establishes the exercise in which the Brothers had to render an account of their conduct to their Brother Director (R pp. 27-31), whilst at the same time, he asked the Brothers to write to him every month. The Brothers' relations with their Director must be free from duplicity (R 30.7), or disguise, or finesse, or detours (R 212-21), without excessive reserve or dissimulation (R 212.20). Simplicity (MD 19.3; RC 29.4) and openness of heart (R 214.4) are normally acceptable attitudes. One must be sincere, even though one is ashamed to reveal one's intimate thoughts and actions (MD 19.2). If the Brothers wish to do God's will, they must obey without fail, for faith assures them that "they are obeying God in the person of the Director" (R 43.12). The practice of mental prayer will also draw on them all sorts of lights (EM 54A-D; MF 177.3).

4. HOW THE FOUNDER IS A MODEL IN THE PRACTICE OF HUMAN AND RELIGIOUS TRUTH

How did the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools "live" the Truth in his life? Whatever he preached in words and in writing, he applied to his behaviour. "Where does truth dwell", we enquired at the beginning of this article? He replies: "In the Church. She is the mouthpiece of Truth, its depository and its oracle" (CL 8, 203). On this level, he would not tolerate insinuations and calumnies which questioned his

orthodoxy. He would rather have seen his schools destroyed than join forces with those who opposed the Bull *Unigenitus*. (id. 89+, 106). He was extremely pained to see his brother Jean-Louis join their ranks. The efforts he made to dissuade him having been useless, he preferred to distance himself from him (id. 228). Letter 65 is particularly eloquent about the respect which he had for the Church on the question of jansenism. Similarly, he never felt any inclination towards quietism, the other heresy of the period.²² His zeal for the triumph of truth made him open schools at Vans and Ales in heretical country and the Brothers "had the consolation to convert several of the adherents who persevered in the Catholic faith".²³ Two remarkable conversions are said to have been made by him: that of a young calvinist and that of Chevalier d'Armetat, even though the latter's was not quite total.²⁴

His respect for Truth towards others was characterised by a great thoughtfulness. For example, he refused to accept a legacy made in his name and to him as Superior of the Brothers, whilst he had been discharged from his functions. He only accepted it on behalf of the community when the notary crossed out his title.²⁵ He was calumniated several times²⁶ and M. de La Chetardie even called him a liar accusing him of being the author of a Memoir drawn up by the Brothers: although he had protested his innocence without convincing the parish priest, he answered him "that he was going to say Mass with that lie (on his conscience)".²⁷ From all his writings emanates an intense horror for untruth, the devil being the father of it and drawing it from his stock, as he liked to quote this passage from the Bible on which he bases at all times his teaching and from which he draws his doctrine on the truth.²⁸

As for his personal conduct, he never undertook any important initiative neither spiritual nor pedagogical, or for the management of the community, without consulting the Brothers or his directors to secure their advice.²⁹ In the most intimate part of his being, he lived the spirit of faith which he gave his Institute. In the Letters he wrote his Brothers each month, his advice aimed solely at helping them live in conformity with their engagements. Thus what his teachings contained, he put it in concrete form in his life.

¹ Trévoux says that "*vrai* and *véritable* are considered synonymous in meaning". T. VIII, p. 476.

² *Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe*, T. IV, p. 365.

³ VL, T. VI, letter V, pp. 37-42. Of the 258 uses of the word VÉRITÉ listed in this article, 130 are in the plural and deal with religious truth.

⁴ These six categories of persons cannot be accused of lying. They are wrong because they did not tell the full truth. It is due more "to ignorance or lack of judgment" (cf. Trévoux, T. III, p. 352). Heresy also is an error against one or more dogmas of faith, an error which is held stubbornly (Ib. T. IV, p. 79).

⁵ Vatican II, *Nostra aetate*, 2.

⁶ De La Salle defines the word MAXIM: "sentence or passage from Holy Scripture" (EM 109).

⁷ Cf. two other beautiful passages in MR 28E and MF 221E.

⁸ SAUVAGE, Fr. Michel, *Les citations néotestamentaires dans les Méditations pour le temps de la Retraite*, CL 1, p. XLVII: "Minister of the word of God, the Brother must strive not to alter it, repeats the Founder after St. Paul; he will utter it in all its coarseness even which is that of the cross, without trying to look for studied human words, for what saves is not giving one's assent to a man but adhesion to Christ whom man has been sent to introduce to those he is to evangelize".

⁹ The adaptation which the teacher must make of his words to the comprehension of his pupils is often mentioned: MR 10D, 31B, 26A, 69B, 23B.

¹⁰ *Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe*, T. IV, p. 364.

¹¹ *La foi de l'église*, pp. 119-120.

¹² AUBERT, Jean-Marie, *Abrégé de la Morale catholique*, p. 374-377.

¹³ TRÉVOUX, T. VIII, p. 476: "*Vrai* and *Véritable* are syno-

nymous. *Vrai* denotes objective truth... *véritable* properly speaking expressive truth".

¹⁴ Ibid. T. IV, p. 151: "*naturel* is also said of that which is not counterfeited, nor artificial, or disguised, or masked. It also means genuine".

¹⁵ De La Salle does not use the word *prétention* but the verb *prétendre* and the participle *prétendu*. (Da II D; R 44.6).

¹⁶ In GAXOTTE, Pierre, *La France de Louis XIV*, p. 187.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 189.

¹⁸ The word *naturel* must not be used as the Founder uses it when opposing it to the view of faith, he talks of "looking at things with the eyes of nature" (R 78.21-22), i.e. "according to the natural inclination or repugnance one has for it" (R 79.1-3).

¹⁹ In GAXOTTE, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

²⁰ Dom Elie MAILLEFER, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, p. 108.

²¹ Si 21,24 (RB 186B); 21,35 (186E); 21,26 (186C); 27,16 (188A); 22,21 (188B); 22,22 and 27, 17-19 (188C). There are also references to Ep 4,25 (RB 186B); Ps 34,13-14 (186D); Jn 8,44 (187B), 1Tm 3,8 (187D).

²² MAILLEFER, *op. cit.*, in English, p. 90.

²³ Id. 116.

²⁴ Id. p. 74-75 and 145-147.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 156-157.

²⁶ Among other examples, CL 8, p. 168-169.

²⁷ CL 7, 439.

²⁸ DEVILLE, Raymond, *L'école française de spiritualité*, p. 119, where he refers to the Scripture as a source of the spiritual doctrine of this school to which the Founder belonged.

²⁹ MAILLEFER, *op. cit.* in English, p. 12, 25, 27, 32, 33, 39...

Complementary themes:

Apostles; Catechism; Christian; Commandments of God; Community; Institute; Duties of a Christian; Director; Church; Pupil; Disciple; Scripture; Word of God; The Holy Spirit; Examination of Conscience; Spirit of Faith; Brother of the Christian Schools; Christian Teacher; Maxims; Ministry; Obedience; Mental Prayer; Penance; Piety; Regularity; Salvation; Vigilance; Will of God; Fidelity; Missions; Decorum; School; Joy; World.

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