

38. GOD'S WORK

Summary:

1. The "opera ad extra". – 2. God's lasallian undertaking. 2.1. The Institute. 2.2. The Ministry. – 3. How De La Salle behaved in God's undertaking. 3.1. The light of faith. 3.2. Total abandonment to God. 3.3. Expectation. 3.4. Discernment through prayer, advice and the search for consensus. 3.5. God's order and the union of Jesus-Christ. 3.6. Human responsibility.

Although the notion of "God's work" is paramount for St. John Baptist de La Salle, in his thoughts as well as in his actions and life, nevertheless, the expression does not figure under his pen more than four times. It is no doubt because he reserves it for some particular purpose that he uses more commonly (sixteen times) its equivalent "God's undertaking".

1. THE "OPERA AD EXTRA"

In the *Devoirs d'un Chrétien*, he uses for the latter a traditional definition: "Whatever God does outside of himself and in his creatures" (Da 17). All he has to do then is to apply it later on to the various divine operations.

Thus in Chapter V of the Rules of Decorum, he justifies the use of entertainment by referring to the rest God allowed himself "according to the expression used in Scripture, after he had toiled for six whole days at the great work of the creation of the world". (RB 131), the very same which in the *Devoirs d'un Chrétien* will become owing to a "howler" "un si grand outrage" "such a great insult" instead of "un si grand ouvrage" "such a great work" (Da 19).

From the first article of the Apostles' Creed, "creator of heaven and earth", he draws two inspira-

tions: in the *Instructions et Prières*: "Heavens, you who make known everywhere the glory of God and are the work of his hands, come also to bless in me the God who made you and that Divine Word that made you." (I. 265) and in "*L'Explication de la Méthode d'Oraison*": "It is doing me too great an honor to say that I am dust and ashes since this dust and these ashes are the work of God and thus not mine but God who is the Author" (EM 49).

With regard to Mary, the masterpiece of Creation, he writes in *Les Devoirs III*: "Why did God want Mary to be born through a miracle? – It is so that she would be considered more the work of God than that of man" (Dc 199), an idea which he repeats and develops in the Meditation for the Feast of her Nativity: "Oh, how fitting it was that she who was to be the Mother of a Man-God, should have been in every way worthy of His power, and the most perfect of all pure creatures." (MF 163.1)

Two other texts concern the redemption and the Church. The first echoes St. Paul: "It is up to us to finish and crown the work of our redemption" (MR 195.1). The second puts in evidence the executioners of St. Bartholomew "being persuaded that with the death of the Saint, the religion he preached would disappear. But as this was the work of God himself, all their plans came to nought." (MF 159.3)

2. THE LASALLIAN WORK OF GOD

2.1. The Institute

There exists in the bosom of the Church a sector which appeals personally to St. John Baptist de La Salle: the new religious family which he is called to establish in it. It is in connection with it that he uses the expression "oeuvre de Dieu" God's work. If he requests Bro. Gabriel Drolin to "pray a lot Our Lord to bless his work" (L. 26.9), it is not only the school in Rome that he has in mind, but the whole Institute, as is evidenced in his Testament where he recalls "that he sent two Brothers to Rome to ask from God the grace that their Society would be entirely submissive to Him." (CL 26, 286). And in their letter of April 1, 1714, the principal Brothers, using his own language when addressing the Founder, will not refer to the Institute otherwise than by the name "the holy work of God which is also yours, since it has pleased God to make use of you to establish and manage it for so long." (Blain 2.118)

2.2. The Ministry

St. John Baptist de La Salle uses also this expression conjointly with its equivalent "ouvrage de Dieu" when applying it to the Brothers. He then intends to refer to their ministry some aspects of which he describes in detail:

— *God makes of them his cooperators:*

"St. Paul says: that is the field which God cultivates, and the building which he is erecting, and it is you that he has chosen to help in this work by announcing to children the gospel of his Son and the truths that are contained in it. This is why you must glory in your ministry and try to save some of these children". (MR 193.3)

— *Yet God remains the master of it and presides over it until it is completed:*

"Be convinced of what St. Paul says, that you plant and water the seed, but it is God through Jesus-Christ Who crowns your work with growth and perfection." (MR 196.1)

— *That is why they must not claim the authorship of it:*

"Is it not, in fact, thieving to attribute to oneself a work such as the preservation of innocence in children, and the conversion of souls, since this is something which belongs to God and to those whom He employs." (MD 62.1)

— *That is why they ask help from on high:*

"Earnestly¹ ask Jesus-Christ to make his Spirit come alive in you, since he has chosen you to do his work." (MR 196.1)

— *They pray...:*

"As soon as you lose the spirit of prayer, and a love for this holy exercise, God will cease to look favourably upon you, but will consider you rather as one unworthy of your employment." (MD 62.1)

— *... and work zealously...:*

"Do not doubt that it is a great gift of God, this grace he has given you to be entrusted with the instruction of children, to announce the gospel to them and to bring them up in the spirit of religion. But in calling you to this holy ministry, God demands that you fulfil it with an ardent zeal for their salvation. For this is the work of God and whoever does God's work carelessly is cursed." (MR 201.1)

— *... obediently...:*

"Compare what you do purely through obedience with what you do through your own impulse, and look upon the former as the work of God and the latter as the labor of man." (MD 57.1)

— *... and in total humility:*

"Your only thought should be to acquit yourself of your ministry in so far as God requires of you towards your pupils, and to inspire them with the Spirit of Christianity. Thus, after the example of the Holy Family, you will not cause your name to be noised abroad, but you will be in the world merely as passers-by, occupied solely in the work of God, causing Jesus to live in the hearts of those he has given you to instruct." (MD 62.2)

— *They are convinced that God cares for them....*

"If therefore you are engaged in gathering a harvest of souls, how can you fear that he who so employs you and whose workman you are, will refuse you the nourishment you need to do his work?" (MD 67.3), "You who do the work of God in your employment, rest assured that he will take care of you, provided that you serve him faithfully and omit nothing that he expects of you." (MD 59.3)

— *... and that he will protect them:*

"Often ask God to give you this generosity and fidelity so necessary to obtain the gift of perseverance and not to suffer the misfortune of those of whom it is said in Scripture: 'Woe to him who performs negligently God's work' (RD 79)²

— *They also know that he holds them accountable:*

"'You are co-operators with God in his work, says St. Paul, and the souls of the children whom you teach are the field that he cultivates through your labors. Since he is the one who has given you the ministry you exercise, when all of you will appear before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ, each one of you will give an account to God of what he has done as a minister of God and as an administrator of his mysteries for children.' (MR 205.1)

3. LA SALLE'S ROLE IN THE WORK OF GOD

St. John Baptist de La Salle's deep conviction that the task to which he has dedicated his life comes from God made him decide on an appropriate behavior which he tried hard to share with his Brothers. This behavior concerns what he commonly calls "the responsibility" (cf. the *Règles que je me suis imposées* No. 3 and No. 7, CL 10, 114), that is the particular task, the mission received from Providence and which entails "duties":³ for him, the management of the Institute; for the Brothers, "the children God entrusted to you" (MF 133.2). 166.2). Let us not however forget according to the Bonne Règle which he borrowed from Father Julien Hayneufve, this order,⁴ "Do

not make any difference between your personal responsibilities and the business of your salvation and perfection" "You must always try to have this in view." (CL 10, 114)

3.1. The faith viewpoint

It is through the "eyes of faith" that St. John Baptist de La Salle considers this "inseparable pair". Of some significance is the use La Salle makes of the verbs "regarder: to view" and "considérer: to consider, to think carefully about": "I will always consider the work of my salvation and of the setting up and management of our community as God's undertaking... and I will often say these words of the Prophet Habakkuk to him: *Domine opus tuum*". "I must often consider myself a useless instrument unless it is in the hands of the Divine Workman", "If I regard myself as holding the place of Our Lord in their regard, it must be because I am obliged to carry their sins as Our Lord carried ours, and because that is a responsibility God has imposed on me in their regard."⁵ (CL 10, 115). He demands the same attitude from the Brothers: "Reflect on what St. Paul says, that God has established in the Church apostles, prophets, and teachers, and you will be convinced that he has also established you in your ministry; you must not doubt that it is a great gift of God this grace he has given you to be entrusted with the instruction of children... Show through your relations with the children entrusted to you that you look upon yourself as ministers of God." (MR 201.1)

3.2. Total abandonment to God

With this in view, he relies on God with total confidence: "That is why I will entrust the care of the Institute to HIM..." (CL 10, 115), a tendency in which self-denial,... "A thing which I must insist on is abnegation of my own judgement and of my own opinions, never abiding by them in anything that concerns me" (Blain 2.301), is coupled with a filial trust in God: "...with the help of Our Lord on which I rely to see it through" (CL 10, 115). He gives plenty of such advice to Frère Gabriel Drolin: "You must rely only on God and leave in his hands the management, the care and other consi-

derations" (L. 21.17), "Pray much that God may do with you what he pleases. You must abandon yourself completely to his will and be careful not to do anything without asking advice" (L. 13.14).

3.3. Expectation

An essential consequence of this is what the Founder means by the expression "not to move ahead": "I must await the orders of God's providence before I decide" (CL 10, 115). This implies of course an eager expectation, intent on knowing what God wants, since he adds immediately "and not ignore it when it becomes known" (CL 10, 115). And "whilst waiting to know what is to be done", one must "do perfectly what one knows" (CL 10, 115). We find numerous examples of this attitude in his correspondence: "As for me, I do not like to undertake anything and I will not do so with regard to Rome no more than I did on other occasions. Providence must make the first move and that makes me happy." (L. 18.17) "let no one (of those you live with) take the initiative in that matter; let God do what is necessary." (L. 37.2), "carry out your school duties quietly and without overeagerness. For, I think that God will not bless you otherwise." (L. 24.6). "Do not miss any opportunities that come your way but do so without haste (L. 24.8). "You do well to await God's orders" (L. 20.3).

3.4. Discernment through prayer, advice and community dialogue

In order to achieve the desired discernment, the Founder has recourse to prayer, a genuine divine consultation: "I will consult him often on anything I will have to do", "I will only do it after I have prayed", "I will ask the Lord to give it to them... I will find some time to pray him a little about it... I will be careful to be very recollected during that time and to raise my heart to God for a while" (CL 10, 15), "... without taking a quarter of an hour to go over the matter with God..." (CL 10, 114).

"I have a strong feeling that having spent quite a while without doing some mental prayer, I must dedicate to it much time in order to find out God's

will regarding what I have to do." (L. 5.1,2) He recommends this habit of his: "It seems to me that you have to pray God and make the pupils continue to recite the rosary and send every Sunday two Brothers to receive Holy Communion in the Chapel of Our Lady in the Cathedral of Notre Dame" (L. 37.2). However, he also turned to others, either for advice: "In his dealings with Mr. de la Barmondière, he never did anything without the advice of Mr. Baudrand and concerning the latter he never failed to ask the wise opinion of Mr. Tronson. Without this advice, he would not have budged an inch, he did nothing on his own" (Blain 300, CL 10, 108), or through seeking community backing, as we see in the well known sentence used in the "Heroic Vow" "in the manner which will seem to us most fitting." (CL 10, 116).

3.5. God's command and union with Christ

In this manner, he makes sure that he is acting on orders from God: "We can attain a very high degree of perfection in the performance of our duties, only if we accomplish them with a view to obeying God", "... in order to do therein only what concerns God's orders" (CL 10, 114, 115), "When I seem to be acting only on his orders, I have nothing to reproach myself, whilst when I undertake something, it is always my doing and I cannot expect good results, nor does God usually give the work his generous blessing" (L. 18.18), "I do not like all these worldly views and they are not the ones the saints adopted" (L. 24.13). Done in this way, actions "are related" (EM 10) to those of Jesus Christ, with which they may "quite conveniently" (RM 10) be "assimilated" (EM 10): "I will unite at least twenty times a day my actions to those of Our Lord and I will strive to perform them with views and intentions similar to his" (EM 114).

3.6. Human responsibility

In his study of the spirituality of self-abnegation of Père Barré, Frère Michel Sauvage quotes this sentence: "I will act as if everything depended on me while relying on grace as if everything depended on God alone."⁶ He then comments: "If it is God's work, I must do it seriously

because I am co-responsible for it, but at the same time, I am aware that he does it by his Spirit irrespective of what I will do.”⁷

To understand that God's work rather than generate inertia and disaffection, helps human activity to attain its highest level, one has only to refer to the life of the Founder and of the first Brothers. Fully aware that they were guardians and managers (of the Institute), they proved that they were its architects with a determination which has been called quite rightly heroic: "... we consecrate ourselves entirely to you to procure with all our strength and all our dedication the setting up of the Society of the Christian Schools. For this purpose we promise to do unanimously and by common consent all that we will believe in conscience and without any human consideration to be conducive to the greatest well-being of the said Society" (CL 10, 116). History has shown that these were not empty words. St. John Baptist de La Salle had every right to require from his disciples zeal and fidelity: "When God called you to this ministry, he wanted you to carry it out with an ar-

dent zeal for their salvation, because it is God's handiwork..." (MR 201.1). "Ask God often to grant you this firmness and this fidelity which are necessary to obtain the gift of perseverance..." (RD 79). It is significant that the Founder completed these two texts with a quotation from Jeremiah: "Woe to him who does the work of God negligently." (Jr 48.10)

¹ That is: without any doubt, certainly.

² Concerning fidelity "in the practice of what is right and particularly with regard to the Rules and your exercises". We know that for him regularity, which develops the Brother's spiritual life, is the condition on which depends the success of the apostolate. Refer to the article in "Thèmes Lasalliens" entitled "Exercises".

³ Duties are the outcome of a given objective situation while obligations follow from an inter-personal agreement (for the Brothers, their consecration to God).

⁴ Julien HAYNEUFVE, *Méditations pour le temps des exercices qui se font dans la retraite des huit jours*. – Paris 1645.

⁵ This same disposition is to be found in the Meditation for the Feast of St. Dominic (M 150).

⁶ Nicolas BARRÉ, *Maximes de conduite chrétienne* – Paris 1694.

⁷ Michel SAUVAGE, *L'abandon chez le Père Barré* – Rome.

Complementary themes:

Conversion; Duty; Disciple; Church; Employment; Spirit of Christianity; Holy Ghost; Example; Fidelity; Grace; Humility; Inspiration; Instruct; Ministry; World; Mystery; Obedience; Perseverance; Prayer; Redemption; Religion; Salvation; Truth; Zeal.

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Bro. Jacques GOUSSIN
Translated from French by Bro. James CALLEJA