

30. SPIRIT OF CHRISTIANITY

Summary:

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1. THE WORD “SPIRIT”

1.1. In the Spirituality of the XVIIth. Century

The French spiritual writers of the XVIIth. Century make lavish use of the word “spirit” but they rarely pause to define it. This means that when they talk about “spirit”, the word refers to a complex reality, the content of which varies greatly, according to each writer, and even within the writings of the same author.

As L. Cognet points out (cf. DS IV, 1233 and foll.) there are writers, especially those who belong to the mystical current of Northern Europe, who insist on the ontological aspect of the word “spirit”. These writers stress its immaterial character and tend to identify it with the soul and nothing else, or they establish a subtle difference between soul and spirit. They move within the Plato-Augustinian line which betokens a certain continuity between the spiritual nature of the soul and God.

Other writers continue to insist very much on the fundamental sense of the word. Here, it is a question of a “principle of action”, a basic root of

human activity and which gives it a special orientation. The Bérulian School, along with many other writers, is prominent in this context. It seems to be generally accepted that when Bérulle’s writings refer to the “spirit”, the function of which is to urge the Christian to practise virtue, he is speaking of the Holy Spirit. But in other authors, the use of this word calls for different shades of meaning which simply cannot be specified without discarding the connection with the Trinity.

Finally, one may point out how in the XVIIth. Century the word “spirit” began to appear, used in the sense of the moral and intellectual quintessence of a work, an author, an institution...

1.2. In De La Salle

De La Salle was not free from this influence in his own day. In his writings, he uses the word “spirit” over 2,000 times, with an abundant variety of qualifying words: “Christian spirit”, “of faith”, “of religion”, “of Jesus Christ”, “of God”, “of penance”, “of prayer”, “of the world”... One of the key words of his spirituality is the “Christian spirit”. This is what concerns us in a special way.¹

2. THE "CHRISTIAN SPIRIT" IN DE LA SALLE

2.1. Biblical roots

We cannot attempt to make any sort of approach to the Lasallian concept of "Christian spirit", except in conjunction with the terms: "maxims of the Gospel" and similar expressions: "Maxims of Scripture", "of the Apostles", "of Jesus Christ"...The very frequent use of all of these demonstrates to us how deeply rooted Lasallian spirituality is, in both cognitive and practical aspects, in the Bible. The Brothers, and through them their pupils, must get to know these "maxims", must be imbued by their spirit and, in short, must translate them into their own lives. The "Christian spirit" is based in such a way, on the Gospel and its maxims, that the lively teaching of these is the indispensable method of forming the true spirit of Christianity in the pupils: "This sacred Book [of the Gospels] is where you must imbibe the truths that you have to teach to your pupils every day, in order to fill them with the true Christian spirit. For this reason, feed your soul daily with the holy maxims contained in this wonderful book, and become familiar with them through frequent meditation" (MF 159,1).

However, the close connection between "maxims" and "Christian spirit" is clearly established when the Saint treats "living by the Christian spirit" and "adherence to the maxims of the Holy Gospel" as being one and the same thing (MD 37,2; MF 175,2).

2.2. Principle of life

From what we have just been saying, we can already develop an idea of what De La Salle understands by "Christian spirit". If by "Gospel maxims", we mean norms of judging and acting emanating from the Gospel, and which must direct every instant of actual behaviour in order to cast it in the mould of Jesus Christ, there is no doubt that habitually adjusting our actions to conform to these maxims, must create in us a unified principle of life, which is capable of determining our behaviour with a view to making it completely Christ-like. This principle which

directs our life, in this way, is no other than the "Christian spirit".

Whether we are talking about "maxims" or "Christian spirit", we can detect a certain fluctuation which sometimes places the emphasis on the intellectual aspect, taking the "Christian spirit" as a state of mind; at other times, the practical aspect is emphasised, taking it as a principle of action. However, it cannot be denied that for De La Salle, both "maxims" and "Christian spirit" are impossible without a close and immediate vital after-effect which is made manifest in one's actions. This pendulum-like motion, which demands the presumption of the principle of reason when action is spoken of, and which changes this to the normal outcome of truth which has been sown in the intellect, is condensed wonderfully in Lasallian terminology in the expressions: "practical maxims" (MR 197,2), "practical truths of faith" (MR 194,3), or when it urges the Brothers that their words "be spirit and life" for their pupils (MR 196,3).

It is only within these two polarities that we can understand this sentence which is so enigmatic and apparently contradictory: "It is not sufficient, then, to bring the Christian spirit to the children and to teach them the speculative truths of our religion; you must, in addition, teach them the practical maxims which are found in the Holy Gospel" (MR 197,2). The "Christian Spirit" which is described here as insufficient, is that which amounts to no more than a nucleus of purely speculative truths, which make no repercussion on daily life. As a result, it is not the "true Christian spirit", which, if it is to be relevant to life, must be raised above the mere foundation not only of the speculative truths of the Gospel, but also above the practices. There are many other assertions of the Saint which have the same meaning: "How do you show that you have the Christian spirit? Rest assured that in order to possess it, your actions must not be contrary to the faith that you profess; rather, let them be the living expression of what the Gospel teaches" (Mf 84,3).

The "Christian spirit" implies, then, that our minds, our hearts and our whole lives are in conformity with the mind, the heart and the life of Jesus Christ, as directed by the "Gospel maxims" which are to be understood not in any moralistic

sense, but as the starting point of a new life according to the Spirit.

3. COMPARABLE EXPRESSIONS

This same reality appears in Lasallian writings under different forms, whose similarity with what we have just looked at, it is well to leave clearly defined. The "Christian spirit" is the closest form. The Saint does not hesitate to use this expression loosely to refer to the aim, put forward so many times to the Brothers in their ministry, that of bringing up [children] in the Christian spirit, of showing their identity with it (MF 132,1). On the other hand, "to bring up in the true Christian spirit" is nothing less than doing it "according to the rules and maxims of the Gospel" (RC 11, 10; R 75 & foll.). At other times, it is the expression, "spirit of religion", which we find in perfect parallel to "Christian spirit" (MF 116, 2 and 176,3); or, as well, the formulas "Catholic spirit" (MF 166,1) or "Gospel spirit" (MF 176,1) which in substance reveal the same meaning. With all these, it is to be noted that each one has its own special nuance, in as much as, for example, the form "spirit of religion" demonstrates clearly the respect and worship due to the Word of God; and that of "Catholic spirit", demonstrates the necessity of understanding the "Gospel Maxims" in the light of the true teaching of the Church. Other expressions such as "spirit of Jesus Christ" and "God's spirit" are deserving of separate studies.

4. RELATIONSHIP WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

4.1. The "spirit of Jesus Christ"

This expression is worthy of special attention. It occurs so often in the writers of the French School that it has become characteristic. There is no doubt that De La Salle gleaned it from this school, but what is not so clear is that he bestows on it the same connotation. In the writings of Bérulle, Olier, J.J. Surin and F. Guilleré, there are plenty of passages which identify the "spirit of Jesus Christ" with the Third Person of the Blessed

Trinity (DS IV, 1238-1246). If we bear in mind that De La Salle says of the "Christian spirit" that "it is the spirit of Jesus Christ Himself" (MR 196,3), it would be easy to let ourselves fall into the temptation of confusing "Christian spirit" and all its equivalent expressions: "spirit of faith", "of religion", "of Christianity"..., with the uncreated Person of the Holy Spirit.²

Let us make a start by noting, with Rayez, that these expressions, in wide use at this period, do possess, however, meanings which are very different and at times, difficult to discern.³ Hence this should be taken as a sensible guideline, when we come to evaluate the expressions of a school whose influence on our Saint is far from being completely determined. Whatever the substance of this expression in the Berulian school we believe that we have sufficient data to affirm that, in the vast majority of instances, the "spirit of Jesus Christ" is nothing else than our resembling Jesus Christ in the way that we think and organise all our actions. In the last analysis, to possess the "spirit of Jesus Christ" consists of: "leading a life in conformity with Him and his teachings, which are articulated in the Gospel and in the whole of the New Testament" (Da IV s.); in the perfect practice of the virtues and the evangelical counsels (MF 166,1); in being "re clothed in Jesus Christ", according to the words of St. Paul (MF 189,1); in resigning oneself, not only in the exterior, to being led by Jesus Christ, but "in sharing in his own plans" (MR 196,3). All these ideas which concur perfectly with what we have stated about the "Christian spirit" and which lead us to consider the "spirit of Jesus Christ" as an entity really distinct from the Divine Person of the Holy Spirit, already present in Baptism, lead us to consider this Person as the source of the growth of this new breath of life in us. What we have just said is beautifully endorsed in the Chapter of the Rule on the "Daily Exercises", where in very close and similar situations, prayers are prescribed to seek "His spirit" from the "Child Jesus" and from St. Joseph" respectively (RC XXVII, 15 & 22). But we would not be faithful to the wise rule established above, if we were not aware of the possibility that in De La Salle himself this expression will have various connotations.

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However, we must admit, and even assuming this identity, that the usual way that De La Salle made use of these two expressions, leads us to allow a certain nuance in them which he qualifies in some way and hence this means that he applies the nomenclature of "spirit of faith" to refer to the spirit proper to the Brothers, whilst when he is referring to the pupils, he prefers that of the "Christian spirit". In this context, a degree of higher perfection seems to be attributed to the "spirit of faith", which will come to denote a certain degree of excellence in the possession of the "Christian spirit". In its turn, this explains the causality referred to above, just like the equivalence established between the "spirit of the Institute" and its purpose: "to bring children up in the Christian spirit".⁵ However, at the same time, it will become clear how it can be that for De La Salle there are not two classes of Christians, but that the spiritual life of seculars, as that of religious, draws out its basic needs from one single source, the Gospel.⁶

6. THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

From the standpoint of principles, as equally from the analysis of historical genesis, it is clear that, for De La Salle, the purpose of the Institute founded by him, is the complete education of children, Christian education (RC 1,3). Such an education includes teaching what is useful for life (RC 1,4; MR 194,1), but it would not be enough if all of it it were not informed by the "Christian spirit" (MR 194,2). To make this come about, the objective that each Brother must keep before his eyes in order to carry out his mission is "to infuse the Christian spirit", this is his "primary commitment" (MR 194,3; MF 171,3; MD 6,2). In order to succeed in this task, "he must teach his pupils about the maxims of the Holy Gospel and the practice of the Christian virtues" (MR 194,3; cf. MD 37,2).

The Brothers do their work as "ministers of Jesus Christ". To comply with this demand, their actions must be motivated only by the Holy Spirit. It is only in this way that their disciples "will reach the point where they possess the Christian spirit

fully (MR 195,2). For them, this spirit will be "the true life which will bring them safely to eternal life" (MR 196,3). It is more; for De La Salle, the Christian spirit opens up to the pupils the way to the highest Christian perfection, in as much as he sets up as the ideal goal that which changes their lives to such an extent that "they no longer breathe except through Jesus" (MF 102,2). Both S. Gallego⁷ and in a more exhaustive study, M.A. Campos,⁸ have attempted to depict the Lasallian concept of sanctity, both in the eschatological and incarnational senses, which are included in this way of outlining the mission of the Brother and the purpose of education.

7. THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN: "THE SPIRIT OF THE WORLD"

After all that has been said, it only remains to us to conclude in antithesis. Anyway, in opposition to God's "maxims", expressed in the Holy Scriptures, the world also raised up its "maxims",⁹ and now proclaims its "spirit" and "wisdom" in opposition to the "Christian spirit".¹⁰ This is the "spirit of the world". The antagonism between these two "spirits" is such that they cannot exist simultaneously in the soul. De La Salle highlighted the relentless warfare between these two irreconcilable principles (MF 182,1) and he left this preoccupation engraved in the recommendations that he made to his sons on his very death-bed (BLAIN 2, 174).

¹ Cf. L. VARELA, *Biblia y espiritualidad en S. Juan Bautista de La Salle*, Salamanca, 1966.

² This is the conclusion of F. CLEMENT Marcel, *Par le mouvement de l'Esprit*, p. 25 & foll.

³ *Revue d'Ascetique et Mystique*, 28 (1952) p. 287.

⁴ S. GALLEGO, *Teología de la educación en S. Juan Bautista de La Salle*, Salamanca, 1960, p. 99 & foll.

⁵ L. VARELA, *op. cit.*, 207-210.

⁶ Cf. M.A. CAMPOS, *Itinerario evangélico de S. Juan Bautista de La Salle*, Madrid, 1988, Vol. I, p. 131.

⁷ S. GALLEGO, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-105.

⁸ M.A. CAMPOS, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 16 & 31; vol. II, p. 315.

⁹ Cf. L. VARELA, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-182.

¹⁰ Cf. L. VARELA, *op. cit.*, pp. 190 & foll.

Complementary Themes:

Christian; Education; Spirit of the World; Holy Spirit; Spirit of Faith; Brothers; Church; Instruction; Gospel Maxims; Maxims of the World; Ministry; Mission; Religion; Religious.

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