

Lasallian Spirituality

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Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli looked at the unfinished work on his desk in the papal apartments. He rose and turned out the desk lamp. Tired, he slowly began the walk to his bedroom. In the quiet of his heart he whispered to his God: "It is Your Church. Take care of it. I'm going to bed." And with that he went to bed.²

My purpose here is to give in a capsule form what I consider to be the essence of the spirituality that was John Baptist de La Salle's and the spirituality which he passed on to his community of teachers by his writings, teaching, and lived example. I wish to anchor these comments in three key texts: (1) *Memoir on the Beginnings*; (2) rule #3 from *Rules I Have Imposed On Myself*; and (3) John Baptist's dying words. In the end, I will tie these texts together in an over-riding consideration: the remembrance of the presence of God. It is my hope that this brief exploration will open doors through which his letters and other writings can be explored and his spirituality more amply explicated.

Among the more personal writings reported in the biographies of John Baptist de La Salle is what appears to be an autobiographical document commonly called the *Memoir on the Beginnings*. The core text that we have of this document is reported in all three original biographies, that of Bernard, Maillefer (both manuscripts) and Blain.

Rule #3 in John Baptist's *Rules I Have Imposed On Myself*, and the passage in the *Collection* which reflects the same sentiment, are a succinct summary of an overriding insight of special genius to integrate employment and the work of personal salvation.

The final words of John Baptist on his death bed are reported in the biographies of Blain and Maillefer as a response to Brother Barthélemy's query concerning his acceptance of the pains God is sending him. The key word in his response is the French word "conduite" which bears some careful examination. Here, too, John Baptist sums up the essence of his life and its God-centeredness.

Memoir on the Beginnings

Although we have difficulty placing this memoir in an exact time slot, it is likely that it was written during the late 1680s or 1690s when John Baptist was experiencing difficulties in Paris and Reims and the community was in danger of folding. As he reflected on the initial steps of

This brief overview of the spirituality we have inherited from our Founder, John Baptist de La Salle, was originally prepared for the consideration of participants of the SIEL session conducted in Rome in 2012-2013. While there are many scholarly papers and books that have attempted to encompass this subject in detail, the author notes that this paper does not pretend to be one of these and suggests that readers consider it an introductory overview with more unsaid than said.

becoming involved with the teachers and the work of the schools, he writes in a vocabulary and style that has an elegant simplicity and strength.

God who guides all things with wisdom and gentleness and who is not accustomed to forcing the inclination of persons, wanting to engage me fully in the care of the schools, did so in an imperceptible manner and over a period of time so that one commitment led me to another, without my foreseeing this at the beginning.³

Who is John Baptist's God? In an era that sometimes made God an inaccessible judge, we find that in this text that John Baptist's God is marked by two qualities: wisdom and gentleness.

His God is wise. This God sees all, knows all, understands all, and is present to all. God does not condemn. God knows humankind and in wisdom loves its imperfection. God is the font of all knowledge, all value, all equity, all just judgment housed in mercy.

This God is the God whose loving providence creates mystery and lovingly houses it in the common everyday fabric of life with love and care that it may enrich us and lead us as it unfolds.

John Baptist's God has the wisdom of a father and a gentleness of the mother. This God's gaze enfolds the needy, the poor, the misguided, those in need of graciousness. There is no harshness in this God. Salvation is the work and the gift of this God. This God exercises a loving vigilance and corrects by love and example. God's gentleness knows no boundaries. Images of God's anger are more the creation of folklore than the stuff of reality.

John Baptist's God is companion and guide. This God accompanies each person in each step of life. Without force, this God insinuates himself into the fabric of each person's life – guiding, accompanying, listening, watching and informing with the subtlety and vibrancy of the Emmaus Companion.⁴

John Baptist reads this God into his own life experience. His key insight is into the patient gradualness of God's wise and gentle work. Step by step. Commitment to commitment. God accompanies and reveals new possibilities with insights of heart. In trust and apparent folly at times, John Baptist walked with Lasallian Spirituality as this loving companion and his heart burned though frequent misunderstanding and disapproval surrounded him. He walked forward.

Indeed, this is John Baptist's experience and his insight.

Perhaps without intention, John Baptist's God is the teacher that he and his companions would envision in their conduct of Christian Schools. For they came to see teachers as people of wisdom and gentleness who were busy accompanying each student on his quest for competency and life. This teacher was not domineering. This teacher was "with" the student, not "over" the student. Anger was never to be the motivation for correction which was always gentle. Vigilance was a loving gaze that wished only the wellbeing of the student. And the adventure of learning was always an adventure that would take the student to a more complete fullness of vision and competence. Yes, John Baptist reveals his God in the *Memoir on the Beginnings* as the teacher

par excellence, leading each student step-by-step deeper into the mystery that enfolds in the reality of life.

Rules I Have Imposed On Myself

In an era which often championed the notion of division between the secular and the sacred, material and spirit, profane and the spiritual, John Baptist discovered in the writing of a contemporary author⁵ a principle of integration which he was to explore and then offer to the members of his community of teachers.

In Blain,⁶ we read the retreat resolutions which John Baptist recorded at the end of one of his retreats. In this resolution number three, he enunciates this principle of integration.

It is a good rule of life to make no distinction at all between the work of our vocation in life and the work of our salvation and perfection. We can be sure that we cannot work out our salvation better or achieve perfection more surely than by discharging our responsibilities, provided that we accomplish them in view of God's design. We must try to keep this precept ever in mind.

In the *Collection*, in the section entitled "Reflections on Their State and Employment that the Brothers Should Make from Time to Time, Especially During Retreat: Regarding Their State and Employment,"⁷ we read this same insight but now addressed to the members of the community.

Do not distinguish between duties of your state and what pertains to your salvation and perfection. Rest assured that you will never effect your salvation more certainly and that you will never acquire greater perfection than by fulfilling well the duties of your state, provided you do so with a view of accomplishing God's design.

These mirror statements, in his personal resolutions and in the reflection required by the *Collection*, point to the groundedness of John Baptist's view of God's work and our cooperation with it.

"No distinction." God is found in doing the work that is the expression of our mission, our being sent. There is no compartmentalizing in John Baptist's life. His work with founding schools, creating and sustaining communities, forming his teachers, responding to the calls of cities, pastors and bishops to establish and sustain foundations – all of this is part of God's great design for him and for his community of teachers. He finds it important to keep this before himself and his associates.

It is the first understanding of what will come to be understood as the integration of the constitutive elements of their calling: mission, community and consecration in our time. They are a community consecrated and called to mission: the educational mission of the salvation of their students. It is a salvation which is of this world and beyond. Not one or the other, nor one above the other. It is an integration that speaks, what would become in our time, a call to wholeness.

John Baptist's final words

In Maillefer⁸ and Blain,⁹ we read the account of John Baptist's final agony and death. The scene is somber, his life had been filled with difficulties. His death was also. As requested, he gives the little community around him his final advice and commendation. Barthélemy presides. He is a disciple and a friend, the first Superior General of the group. The biographers tell us that Barthélemy, who did not leave his bedside, asked him if he accepted the pains he was experiencing. The biographers tell us that he answered in a "loud, dying" voice. "Yes, I adore in all things, the conduct of God in my regard!"

The English translation of the response does not have the force of the original French. In responding: "Oui, j'adore en toutes choses, la conduite de Dieu à mon égard," the noun "la conduite" carries with it connotations which reveals John Baptist's treasured experience of God.

"Conduite" means more than manage, conduct, or do. It connotes a connectedness that echoes "association," "accompaniment," "companion," even "brother and sister." John Baptist's God has not been "doing" things to him. He has enlisted John Baptist as his companion on an adventure of mission which is God's own mission: salvation. With Jesus as his visible icon, God has invited John Baptist to the adventure of healing, misunderstanding, emptiness, friendship, betrayal, death and resurrection – all for the salvation of others. It is in this adventure that John finds ultimately his identity and purpose. As it was with John Baptist, so it is with us, his followers. We band of brothers and sisters whose mission is salvation through education.

The presence of a provident God

In the biographers,¹⁰ we read an account early in the association of John Baptist and the first teachers. Seeing the uncertainty of the small band of teachers, John Baptist seeks to encourage them by reminding them of God's providence found in the Gospel. He encourages them to rely on trust in the God who clothes the fields and birds.

But the young men, not schooled in religious talk but very schooled in the realities of the life of poverty, respond with disdain to his words. They recall to him the distance between their stations in life. He, the wealthy young canon, landed and privileged; they, with nothing but what his generosity has given them.

John Baptist is silenced by the truth of their words. If he is to preach, he must live what he preaches. He, too, must cast his bread on the water and rely on this provident God he preaches so facilely. He is challenged. Like David before Nathan, he can only change and convert. Like Jesus, he must empty himself to be filled with his ever-present companion God.

And so it was from the beginning: God's presence grounded in reality, casting a light which allowed no dark corners to go unexplored, calling and accompanying gently with a wisdom that defied compromise.

When John Baptist instructs the teachers in prayer, he grounds it in a deep, life-giving awareness of the presence of this provident God. He gives them varied ways of imagining this God and His

presence. Perhaps the most poignant is the image of the God who acts in and through the mission-committed community.

This is the God who calls, who confirms and who accompanies. This is the real God of challenge, not merely a religious idea. This is the God who in prayer invites each teacher to peel back the surface of reality and to gaze on the mystery of love-in-action in every moment, every challenge, every circumstance of life.

This is the God of Jesus who is father, creator, savior, and life-giver.

In a style that is terse, rational, and to the point, John Baptist will fill pages with the story of this God. Reading this God through the lives of God's heroes and heroines, the saints; reading this God through the snips of Sacred Scripture read on Sundays; reading this God through the very fabric of their life in the *Meditations for Time of Retreat*, John Baptist will proclaim the Gospel – Good News – of presence and possibility. In monthly letters, in the confessional, in his own preaching, and in the conduct of his life, he will proclaim the Good News of this God and invite his companions to do the same with their lives. He will call his teachers shepherds and bishops. He will remind them that the ever-present God calls them as they call themselves and one another: brother!

As I look at the treasure that John Baptist and his first companions have left us, I see a richness grounded in the God who calls, who acts and who accompanies. I see a new age for our Lasallian Family as we learn to broaden John Baptist's insights to encompass men and women across the world of many continents and religious persuasions to grab hold of this common heritage: a provident God at work in the fabric of reality. A God whose heart-of-hearts has been conquered by the needs of young people who hunger with a hunger they cannot always articulate: a hunger for salvation, for "salus," for wholeness. A God who challenges distinctions, separations, and excuses. A God who calls for an uncompromised wholeness.

This is our Lasallian Spirituality. This is our call to action and association.

Notes

1. Jeffrey Calligan, FSC, is a member of the District of New Orleans / Santa Fe, Lasallian Region of North America. A native of New Orleans, Louisiana, Brother Jeffrey has been teacher, administrator, and twice served as Assistant Provincial of his home District. He served on the international Catechetical Commission of the Brothers and has presented programs in the US, Central America, Europe, Africa and Pacific Region. He is perhaps best known for his accompaniment and presentations during the Lasallian Leadership Institute, and the Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies, for which he has been a major presenter for more than 20 years. He has recently returned to his home district after extended service with Lasallian Education Services in the District of Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and now resides at Saint Paul's Secondary School in Covington, LA.

2. Folklore.

3. Brother Bernard in *Cahiers lasalliens* (CL) #4:33; Dom François Elie Maillefer in CL #6:31; Maillefer in CL #6:29-30; Jean-Baptiste Blain in CL #7:169.

4. See Luke 24:13-35.

5. Julien Hayneufve in CL #16:55.

6. CL #8:318-319.

7. CL #15:95.

8. CL #6:257.

9. CL #7:174.

10. CL #7:104.

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