

Lasallian Catechetics and the Heart

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The Evolution of the Original Catechetical Method

It is important to have an overview of the enduring characteristics of the Lasallian catechetical method, remembering that it developed through catechism teaching in grade schools, was gradually extended as pupils stayed longer in school and eventually became quite advanced theological courses in the boarding schools in France during the nineteenth century.

The "great mysteries" were the essential foundation, the doctrinal basis on which the heritage was to be built; the Sunday lesson on these "great mysteries" was always to be given in the classroom where the children were in their accustomed places; regularly throughout the day, teacher and pupils were reminded of the presence of God and acknowledged it; there was to be no distinction between the better-off pupils and the others as to where they sat; the use of sub-questions was to make sure that pupils understood the words they were being asked to commit to memory because memorization was always to follow understanding, not precede it; holy cards, cards with the acts of faith, hope and charity, cards that carried merits and demerits all were used in the Christian school; every effort had to be made to avoid punishing during the catechism lesson; De La Salle's school, unlike the Saint Sulpice method, or that used by the Jesuits, placed less importance on competition and much more on cooperation; the Brother-teacher was carefully formed as a catechist, was required to study the content of his lessons every day, and was constantly appraised by his peers through the community's catechism of formation.

All of this assumed that all the pupils were baptized Catholics who shared the same faith and whose parents implicitly accepted that their children would be instructed in the truths of faith and participate in sacramental ceremonies, especially those associated with preparation for and participation in the sacraments of Penance [Confession or Reconciliation], attendance at Mass and the reception of Holy Communion.

But there were two particular foundation practices which need to be treated in greater detail.

Heart – "Touching Hearts"

In his article on *The Catechetical Method of Saint Sulpice*, to which reference has already been made,² we have already noted the words of Père Bäüyn that

In our catechism classes we must make an effort to instill in children an extreme horror for sin, a high esteem for the sacraments, and a spirit of great awe so that

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they will approach them rightly disposed. There should not be any satisfaction taken in instructing them in the things absolutely necessary for salvation. One should do all that one can to touch their hearts, make them achieve a thorough change, uproot their bad habits, and help them make good confessions.

Commenting on these words, Joseph Colomb remarks that “**teaching** [emphasis added] the heart is indisputably the essential purpose.”³

Notice that although Bäuyin uses the expression *touching hearts*, Colomb uses the verb **teaching**, and then goes on to comment that “In a word, it is necessary to begin by **winning** [emphasis added] hearts, and then all is won.”⁴

The focus of spirituality in seventeenth-century France was on the *heart*, as a contemporary of De La Salle, Saint Jean Eudes writes:

It signifies this material and bodily hear . . . (it) is used in sacred scripture to signify the memory . . . it denotes the understanding used for meditation . . . it signifies the free will of the superior and reasonable part of the soul . . . it signifies the highest part of the soul which the theologians call the point of the spirit . . . At times it signifies the whole interior of man . . . It means the divine Spirit, the heart of the Father and the Son . . . The Son of God is called the heart of the eternal Father in the sacred scriptures.⁵

Teaching the heart, then, was to appeal *to memory, to understanding, to free will, to the higher part of the soul . . . to the point of the spirit . . . to the divine Spirit*. The act of teaching in itself certainly did not necessarily guarantee that the ‘heart’ was ‘touched’ or ‘won.’ But the very act of so **teaching**, at least provided the opportunity for the grace of God to work, and for De La Salle, the daily task of the teacher was to be the ‘instrument’ of God’s grace by being like the angels ascending and descending Jacob’s ladder, as he remarks,

You must do the same for the children entrusted to your care. It is your duty to go up to God every day by interior prayer to learn from Him all that you must teach your children, and then come down to them by adapting to their level and so to teach them what God has communicated to you for them.⁶

There are many more direct references from De La Salle’s writings which could be cited but here is an important one which, once again, highlights the importance of the dedication of the person who wishes to catechize:

You too can perform several miracles with regard to yourself and to your employment. As regards yourself, by entire fidelity to grace not allowing any inspiration to pass without corresponding there-to fully. As regards your employment, by touching the hearts of the children entrusted ‘to your care’ by rendering your children obedient to, and faithful in the practice of the maxims of the Gospel.⁷

The expression “to touch hearts,” therefore, is not peculiar to Saint John Baptist de La Salle, but as Jacques Goussin points out, the word itself has a wide range of meanings, according to the context in which it is used:

To touch in the most expressive meaning of the word does not only signify “to reach,” “to graze,” “to make contact,” but “to penetrate” in accordance with its use when dealing with weapons, hence the power of the figure of speech when one refers to the moral sphere. As for the word “heart,” it stands for what is most intimate, most deep and most personal in man, especially in whatever concerns the will: the intention, the resolution and the going into action.⁸

De La Salle’s writings for the Brothers, especially his *Meditations*, leaves us in no doubt about how he saw the importance of ‘touching hearts’ as Goussin’s complete text shows us:

St. John Baptist de La Salle uses the expression “to touch hearts” 25 times. On another twelve occasions he uses expressions where only the verb “to touch” figures with an identical meaning. We note that it is always in an important context related to the finality of the Institute and the Lasallian charism: ‘Your employment would be of little use if it did not aim at the salvation of souls. Does your zeal for the poor make you look for means as efficacious as those used by St. Ignatius? The more you will apply yourself to meditation for the good of the souls entrusted to you, the more will God make it easy for you to touch hearts.’⁹

The different verbs used by De La Salle in relation to “heart” are perhaps an unconscious appreciation of the different pastoral situations that the catechist can encounter. We have already noted “touch” and “win” but you can also find “*you are obliged to ‘insinuate’ his love into the hearts of those whom you instruct*” (Meditation 39.1) and “You should apply yourself with the greatest care to **imprint** [God’s] holy love on the hearts of those you instruct” (Meditation 102.2).

A second original practice of the Lasallian heritage that aimed specifically at “touching hearts” was the development of the daily Reflection.

The Reflection¹⁰

The Reflection became an integral part of the daily program of the Christian schools founded by John Baptist de La Salle. We need to recall that in the first schools the Brother spoke rarely, indeed on only three occasions, as the following citations reveal: “This is why they will speak aloud only on three occasions: first, when he has to correct a pupil because none of the pupils can do so; second, when he teaches catechism; third, during the reflections and examinations of conscience.”

This text, which does not appear in the *Rule of 1705*, finds its place in the *Rule of 1718* along with other aspects transposed from the *Conduct of Schools*: “This is why they will speak only on three occasions . . . 3) in the Reflections which every Brother should make during the prayers, morning and evening, and then they will speak only in a moderate tone.”

This, then, was one of the few moments when the usually silent Brother, directing the multiple activities that were inherent in the simultaneous system of teaching, spoke directly to his pupils in a way which showed his concern for them and for their lives. The earliest reference is to be found in the text of the *Religious Instructions and Exercises of Piety for the Christian Schools*:

He who begins the prayers, reads every day the five points of the following reflections, and after reading them, repeats the points to be explained by the Teacher for this day. When there are five school days in the week, he repeats the first point on the first day, the second point on the second day and so on for the others. When there were only four school days, he begins by repeating the second point, and when there are only three school days in the week, he does not repeat the first two points but begins with the third.¹¹

The five reflections themselves are preceded by the following general remark which reminds us of the same concern in the *Method of Saint Sulpice*: “To place ourselves in a frame of mind not to fall into any sin today, we must make some reflections and good resolutions.”

Here are the texts of the five reflections, read aloud each day by the prayer reader, and then followed immediately by a reading of the particular reflection for that day:

1. We must consider that this day has been given to us only to work for our salvation.
2. We must realize that perhaps this day will be the last day of our lives.
3. We must make a firm resolution to use this day to serve God well so that we can gain eternal life.
4. We must be prepared to die rather than offend God today through sin.
5. We must think about the faults that we most usually commit, foresee the occasions that make us fall into them, and seek the means of avoiding them.

There are explicit references to the practice of the reflection in other writings which we can attribute to John Baptist de La Salle, e.g. the *Conduct of Schools* and the *Rule of 1718*. In the *Conduct of Schools* there are three references where the practice is explained in terms similar to the already quoted reference to *The Exercises of Piety*:

1. There are five reflections in the morning prayer for the five days of the week. They will be read every day, making a slight pause between each one. The pupil who recites the prayer, after reading them all, repeats the one to which particular attention is to be given on that day. Then there will be a pause for about the space of a Miserere [ed. 3 minutes] during which the teacher will offer a short reflection on the topic, adapted to their understanding.
2. The five reflections are thus repeated in order and each one serves as a subject for exhortation, one following the other, on each of the five days on which school is held.
3. If there is a feast in the week on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday, on the two days on which school is held, the teacher will speak on the subject of the first two reflections and on the Thursday, the third topic. If the feast is on Friday or Saturday, the teacher will

speak on the subject of the fourth reflection on Thursday, and, on whatever day there is no feast, on the fifth topic. If there are two feasts in the week, he will for that reason not make the first reflection, and if there are three feasts, he will omit the first two reflections.¹²

Perhaps it is not easy for us in the twenty-first century to accept that the topics of these five reflections were given to the first pupils without variation throughout the entire school year unless we consider that life expectancy in seventeenth-century France was subject to many uncertainties. There were the many lives lost in the wars pursued by Louis XIV as young men were pressed into military service; there were the crop failures that led people usually to seek refuge in the cities and towns; there were the severe winters, such as those of 1683-4 and especially 1709-10 when it is estimated that in a population of 19 million, close to three million people died. Life expectancy was low, so that the shortness of life and the immediacy of death were only too familiar.

These original five reflections (dating from 1702 in the earliest Archive edition) may surprise us by their tinge of moral pessimism, tending towards the Jansenism against which De La Salle was always opposed. Modern scholarship has indeed shown that these five topics were not original to De La Salle, but bear a very strong resemblance to passages found in the *Catéchisme de Montpellier* (1702) attributed to Charles-Joachim Colbert,¹³ a catechism later considered by the Institute to be Jansenist in its general tone. Certainly, the original language of this text, compared with that from Lasallian sources, leaves little doubt that they are variations of the same text, possibly both drawn from a common original source.

What is clear, however, was the intention of helping the pupils to reflect on their own lives so that they could take some kind of resolution about improving some aspect that was not going well.

Reflection and Examen

It is clear in De La Salle's mind that there is an important link between the reflections which follow the morning prayer and the examination of conscience which was an integral part of the afternoon prayers, before the dismissal of the classes. Writing of this *examen*, De La Salle says, "This examination of conscience is divided into four parts, and each part or article into five points."¹⁴

There is, however, meant to be an integral link with the same points as those for the reflections which follow the morning prayer, as the text clearly indicates: "As regards the five points of the article to be read during the week, the same order and the same practices as indicated with regard to the five reflections for morning prayer, are to be kept."¹⁵

It is not easy to make a close connection between the articles of the afternoon *examen* and the five reflections of the morning, except in the most general terms. The afternoon *examen* concentrates on the kind of faults into which children are most likely to fall by neglect of their ordinary duties to parents, teachers or to one another, and differs substantially with the preparation for the Sacrament of Penance.¹⁶ Perhaps the general relationship is that the

experienced teacher could bring the general points of the original reflections to bear upon a particular, practical focus in the life of the child at school, as for example a vice to be avoided, a virtue to be practiced. Another possibility is that the teacher, who had spent the whole day with the same children, could remind his pupils during the afternoon prayers of the particular point of reflection which he had given them in the morning, so as to help them renew their intention of improving the situation on which they had reflected.

Relationship to Other Emphases of De La Salle's Writing and Practices

Although there seems to be only one explicit reference to the reflection as such in De La Salle's *Meditations*, there is a strong inner coherence between the content and daily frequency of the reflection and other emphases to be found in De La Salle's writings and school practices. The content of the original five reflections is a reminder of his concern for the salvation of children. Prolonged reflections on the need to work for salvation, on the shortness of life and the unexpectedness of death, the importance of serving God and not offending him, the cultivation of greater awareness of the common ways of offending against God's law, are all reminders of De La Salle's insistence in the *Rule of 1705* of how difficult it is to repair the habitual faults of the young at a later age. Among the many references which could be cited in this regard, the most appropriate would be articles 3, 4 and 6 of the *Rule of 1705*:¹⁷

The end of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children and it is for this purpose that schools are maintained where teachers, having these children under their care from morning until evening, can teach them to lead good lives by instructing them in the mysteries of our holy religion, by inspiring them with Christian maxims, and so offer them a suitable education. (3) . . . It is necessary that there be persons who substitute for the fathers and mothers in order to instruct these children as they need to be in the mysteries of religion and in the principles of a Christian life. (4) . . . As the principal fruit to be expected from the institution of the Christian schools is to forestall these disorders [idleness and bad companions] and prevent their evil consequences, it is easy to judge their importance and their necessity. (6)

De La Salle's insistence on the importance of teaching children the *maxims of the Gospel* can be found in many of his writings. We have already noted the third point of the Meditation 91, for the end of the year, for example, which raises a number of points with regard to the duty of the teacher towards his pupils, reminding us of aspects of the reflection, to which he explicitly refers: "All these ways of instructing them should often have been the subject of your reflections and you should have studied to succeed in doing this."

There is also an important connection between the subject matter of the reflection and De La Salle's insistence on "touching hearts." If the teacher is to be restrained in his speaking with his pupils it is so that when he does speak, he will be listened to more attentively. The emphasis on careful preparation of the reflection suggests that it was to be one of the important moments of the day when "heart spoke to hearts."

This sensitivity to the quality of what we would call today the relationship with the pupils is found in a reference to a special feature of the catechism lessons for Sundays and feasts:

On Sundays and holy days, when the Catechism lasts three times as long as on the other days, he will always choose some story that the pupils will enjoy and tell it to them in a way that will please them and renew their attention. He will tell it to them with details that will prevent them from becoming bored.¹⁸

This seems to be a natural corollary with that special relationship of speaking from the heart in faith which marked the reflection.

Development of the Tradition in the Institute

The reflection is one of those foundational Lasallian practices which was expanded from its original form during the development of the Institute. Some of the main lines of this development can be suggested, even though there are significant gaps in the documentation available to follow its development in every detail.

The original form and content of the five reflections must have become irksome as the schools kept children for a much longer period of time. While it is true that the truths contained in the original reflections are in themselves perennial, nevertheless the coming of the boarding schools in the eighteenth century and the development of many secondary schools in the nineteenth century must have pushed the Brothers to allow their tradition to evolve beyond the original limits of content.

There is already some hint of this when the Chapter of 1787, for example, recognizes that the Brothers are bound to teach the catechism of the diocese in which they are working and follow the prayers prescribed by this catechism, but at the same time insists on maintaining the reflection: “The prayers of the diocese where the Brothers are established will be recited instead of those ordinarily recited in the schools, but without cutting out the morning reflections and the evening examination of conscience.”¹⁹

The first reference to an enlarged sequence of reflections appears to be in the revised edition of the *Conduite des Ecoles* for 1838 which states:

The book of the Exercises of Piety in use in the Christian schools contains a sequence of reflections [sic] on the principal duties of a Christian. They are divided into five articles which serve as the topic for exhortations for a month. Each article contains five reflections, one for each school day of the week.²⁰

However, the *Exercices de Piété* printed in Rouen as a supplement to the *Duties of a Christian* in 1845, does not contain the newer form found in the edition cited above. From the text which follows, however, it seems likely that an enlarged series was already in general usage by 1838. Here follows the full text of the relevant section.

ARTICLE II.

Concerning the Reflections in the morning prayer & the examens of the evening. The book of the Exercises of Piety in use in the Christian Schools contains a sequence of reflections on the principal duties of a Christian. They are divided into five articles so as to serve as topics for exhortations for a month. Each article contains five reflections, one for each school day of the week. Every day at the morning prayer, the reflection corresponding to the day will be read, and the teacher will explain it during the time needed for a good **Miserere**, making the children aware of their obligations in this matter and suggesting the means and resolutions which they should take to carry out these duties faithfully. There are also for the evening an equal number of articles and reflections which should be read in the same manner. They have a certain resemblance to the corresponding ones of the morning, so that they can serve as a subject of examination on the way the day has been spent, and the accomplishment of the resolutions taken in this regard during the morning. In this way, during each month the children will have their principal duties presented to them, as well as the most usual faults common to their age-group. This can be of great benefit to them, especially if it leads them to develop the good habit of foreseeing each morning the faults they are most likely to commit during the day, and to examine themselves in the evening on the resolutions they had taken. It is in these short exhortations that a teacher, who appreciates the incalculable value of a soul, should show his zeal for winning to God those who are confided to him. He will, then, be careful always to prepare what he has to say, so that being convinced of it himself, he can state it with more conviction and in a more persuasive manner.²¹

The evolution, not only in the number of topics for consideration, but in the broader view of the Christian life is quite striking. This would appear to be a development, very much in harmony with the continual updating of the *Conduite des Ecoles* as the Brothers saw the need for new or changed emphases. In the series for the five weeks it is worth noting that there are only three topics assigned for the 5th week, giving some 23 topics for each month.

The Reflection in General Chapters and Circulars

Besides the General Chapter referred to earlier, other General Chapters have referred to the practice of the Reflection and encouraged the Brothers to maintain it. Thus, the General Chapter of 1853 (Resolution XII), specifies that “school will end in the morning at 10.50 with the recitation of a decade of the Rosary. This decade will be followed by the Reflection after which a Pater and Ave will be said.” The General Chapter of 1884, reflecting the growing lack of uniformity possible in the then growing international Institute, makes the following remark:

Reflections vary according to circumstances. When feast-days are approaching, the teacher will speak of the aspects relating to the feast, such as the ceremonies to take place, attendance, processions and any special matters relating to the feast. On Confession days, there will be consideration of the dispositions necessary for the sacrament of penance. On Communion days, the teacher will give a reminder

about acts of faith, humility, adoration and thanksgiving which will serve equally well for preparation as for thanksgiving.²²

In Circular 197 (January 6, 1915), Brother Imier de Jesus reminds the Institute of the three forms of religious teaching carried out by the Brothers, e.g. the catechism lesson, the exhortation or reflection, and the explanation of the Gospel. Speaking of the reflection, he remarks: “The ideal of the daily exhortation or reflection is to enlighten the conscience about moral principles, move the will to carry out firm resolutions, and if possible, satisfy the taste of the listeners with well-balanced and serious words. The Reflection is a powerful means of formation.”²³ Other references to the reflection can be found in Circulars 107 and 346.²⁴

The *Catechist's Manual of 1908* mentions the “Reflection” or “Exhortation” as follows:

Without neglecting the formation of the heart and the will, catechism has as its immediate and principal object to expand light in the spirit, to give life to and enliven the faith and to make clear ideas related to dogma and Christian morality. In the exhortation, however, the main intention is to move the will. Beginning with known truths and presenting them again briefly to the spirit, principles of direction are deduced, motives are put forward for the child to accept and there is an attempt to stir the will to bring something good into practice.²⁵

The Development of Collections of Reflections

It seems natural that this enlarged number of topics for reflections led to the collection and subsequent publication of Collections of Reflections. By the late 1870's, there are already examples in France and Canada (and only a few years later in the United States in English), printed copies of collections of reflections to respond to the five weeks program. In the 20th century, there appears to develop a much greater freedom in the choice of the topics for reflection. There are many different examples of collections made by individual Brothers or published for general use.

After a period of relative eclipse in many countries after the Second World War, interest in the Lasallian tradition has once again seen the recovery of the tradition in France. Copies of reflections are prepared for each school month and circulated to Lasallian schools and communities from a central point.

Some Concluding Remarks

There are strong reasons of a pastoral nature for the recovery of this tradition of the reflection, spoken from the heart of the teacher to the hearts of the pupils. It represents a particular aspect of that “teaching the heart” and “touching hearts” which has characterized the work of John Baptist de La Salle and his Brothers. The development of the tradition by successive generations of Brothers is one of the best indices of the value of the initial perception of De La Salle and his first followers.

The reflection is consistent with so many emphases in Lasallian writings, especially the concern frequently expressed by De La Salle that the Brother himself needs a deep spirit of faith, of zeal, of prayer, and a willingness to speak in faith during the privileged moments of the reflection. This was one of the consistent perceptions of the Brothers from the District of Torino, who replied to a questionnaire on the Reflection, in the pages of *Rivista Lasalliana* in 1934. For many, the reflection was linked necessarily with the meditation made by the Brother himself. The reflection was his moment to share with his pupils the fruit of his own contemplation.

Notes

1. Brother Gerard Rummery holds a doctorate from Lancaster University, where he studied world religions. Fluent in French, Spanish, Italian and German, he served two periods on the staff of the International Lasallian Center in Rome and was twice elected to the General Council of the De La Salle Christian Brothers (1986-1993 and 1993-2000). In the United States, he is a foundation presenter of the Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies and of the Lasallian Leadership Institute. Since 2000, he works mainly with educators as a presenter for Lasallian Education Services in Australia and as an Adjunct-Professor at the Australian Catholic University.

2. Cf. *The Catechetical Method of Saint Sulpice* by Joseph Colomb, in *Shaping the Christian Message*, pp.98-118, edited Gerard S. Sloyan, Deus Books, 1958.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid, p.107

5. Jean Eudes, “The Most Admirable Heart of the Most Sacred Mother of God” in *Oeuvres Completes* 6, pp.33-40.

6. John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, 198.1.

7. John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditation for Feasts*, 180.3. Cf. also especially the following references from the *Meditations for Sundays and Feasts*: 33:2; 43:3; 44:2; 65:2; 79:2; 81:2; 144:1.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 148.3.

10. The text that follows is largely taken from my article “Reflection No. 50” in *Lasallian Themes*, No. 2, Brothers of the Christian Schools, Rome, 1995.

11. John Baptist de La Salle, *Religious Instructions and Exercises of Piety for the Christian Schools*, edited by Eugene Lappin, FSC (Landover, Maryland: Lasallian Publications, Christian Brothers Conference, 2002), p. 182.

12. John Baptist de La Salle, *The Conduct of Christian Schools*, Ch. VII, Art. ii, p. 77.
13. *Catéchisme de Montpellier* Vol. 2 (1702) attributed to Charles-Joachim Colbert, p. 225.
14. *Cahiers lasallien* 24, p. 77.
15. Ibid.
16. Cf. De La Salle's *Religious Instructions and Exercises of Piety for the Christian Schools*.
17. *Cahiers lasallien* 25, pp. 16-17.
18. John Baptist de La Salle, *The Conduct of Christian Schools*, Art. 3, p.108.
19. Chapter of 1787, Art. 38, p. 107.
20. *Conduite des Ecoles* for 1838 (Ch.XIX, Art. ii).
21. *Exercices de Piété* printed in Rouen as a supplement to the *Duties of a Christian* in 1845, Art. II.
22. *Circular 33*, General Chapter of 1884, pp. 3D-31.
23. *Circular 197*, January 6, 1915, pp. 35-36.
24. See *Circular 107*, pp. 120, 127 and *Circular 346*, p. 18.
25. *Manuel du Catéchiste*, pp. 59-60.