

The Process of Justification in the Spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle¹

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine the way in which the process of justification is presented in the spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. To help me in this I shall use two basic texts – *Meditations* and *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer* – composed by the Saint.

Although he was a doctor of theology, De La Salle has not left us any systematic treatise on theology. Upon examination, however, his writings are full of teachings about the spiritual life. At first sight, this would seem to pose problems for this present study, but in fact it is a positive factor. While De La Salle did not construct a theory, he was able, and very successfully too, to present in a systematic form the way in which he lived his faith. Before putting down anything in writing, he lived this life of profound faith with his teachers. It was only subsequently that he wrote about it in detail in his *Meditations* and in the *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*.

When one analyzes Saint La Salle's faith journey, it becomes obvious that it was marked by a profound conversion experience. He discerned the call of God in "poor and abandoned children." He was willing to put himself into the hands of Providence so that God's will should be accomplished in him. Finally, he allowed himself to be led by the grace of God in most unexpected directions.

It never occurred to him that, because of his chance meeting with Adrien Nyel, God would lead him so far. All he did was take one step at a time toward the apostolate God was going to entrust to him. In order to be faithful to this call and to understand better the call of God in the person of the poor, he had to give up his comfortable lifestyle. It is in the successive stages of De La Salle's radical conversion to the poor that one perceives his process of justification. He became aware of his sinful condition so that God would justify him. And so, justified by the grace of Christ, he allowed himself to be guided by the Holy Spirit so as to fulfill his mission through the educational service of the poor.

Following the example of their Founder, the Brothers also are called to acknowledge their sinful condition, so that justified by the grace of Christ, they can be efficient instruments of the grace of God in the exercise of their ministry.

The Process of Justification

We shall see now how the six stages of the Pauline process of justification are presented in the spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

1. Our Sinful Condition

The first stage in the process of justification is the acknowledgment of our sinful condition. Our own sins are the result of original sin. De La Salle points out that a Brother should acknowledge his sinful condition before God, because this sinful condition is an offence against the Creator. He suggests Brothers should acknowledge their condition in the following terms:

O my God, I acknowledge that I have greatly offended you, and I am constantly conscious of my sins, because it is against you that I have sinned, and I have done so in your presence. I was even conceived in sin.³

For De La Salle, it is absolutely essential for a Brother to acknowledge his sinful condition, because this is the basic condition for God's grace to appear in his life. But according to De La Salle, it is not enough simply for the Brother to be aware. He must make his pupils aware too. What is more, De La Salle points out clearly the dangers that the spirit of the world represents for one who wishes to respond freely to the grace of God. That is why part of the mission of the Brother is to keep pupils away from sin:

This is why God has provided children with teachers ... to guide children ... through all the dangers they meet in the world ... This is the main concern you must have for the children entrusted to you. It is the main reason why God has entrusted you with so holy a ministry.⁴

Since a Brother must be a model for his pupils, he is under the obligation, in the first place, of acknowledging his sinful condition, and then, secondly, as he exercises his ministry, of helping his pupils to become aware of their sinful condition.

2. We Are Made Free by the Grace of Christ

In the Meditation for Good Friday, De La Salle writes that the death of the Son of God is the consequence of the sins and the evil which reigns in the world. However, the love of God freely given makes us free through the intermediary of His own Son. And so it is important for the Brother to express himself in the following terms during interior prayer:

I earnestly beseech Our Lord Jesus Christ to show His goodness to me by applying to me the merits He had the mercy to acquire for me by His passion and death, which of themselves are very efficacious and all-powerful; so that completely covered by them, sin is no longer apparent in me, and in this way I may be more pleasing to you and better disposed to receive your grace and enlightened in interior prayer.⁵

We are made free by the grace of God in Jesus Christ who has redeemed us by His death and resurrection. In the face of this great sign of love, a Brother must “render Jesus love for love in acknowledgment of so great a gift.”⁶

The first step in the plan of salvation is always God’s.

It was necessary that God Himself through Jesus Christ Our Lord should show us the road we were to follow, and inspire us with the desire of walking in the footsteps of His Son.⁷

That is why the Brother is merely “a voice” of God⁸ as he fulfills his mission. He is simply a voice, receiving from God the grace to exercise his ministry.

The fact that the first step is God’s alone is shown clearly in the very vocation of the Brother. It is a call freely made by God to give Christian education to children and young people: “Thank God that He has had the goodness to call upon you to obtain such great benefits for children.”⁹

3. Made Free by the Grace of God, We Are Transformed into Children of God

When Saint La Salle speaks of mysteries in the second part of the *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, he makes an explicit reference to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. In the Incarnation, he sees the mercy of God who gave His own Son for the redemption of humankind. By this merciful act of God in the person of His Son and through the intermediary of the Holy Spirit, we receive the grace to be transformed into the sons and daughters of God.

O God, Eternal Word, I believe with all my heart that You became the Son of Man in order to win for me the grace to become the child of God Your Father.¹⁰

By the very fact we have become children of God, our lives must be guided by the Spirit of God. We must look at things not in the way the world looks at them, but with the eyes of faith, since God’s grace lives in us. We are the temples of the Holy Spirit. That is why he says, “You must live and act only according to the Spirit and by the light of faith.”¹¹

4. Made Free by the Grace of Christ, We Are Now Animated by the Spirit

Since we have been made free by the grace of God, we are now animated, renewed, led by the Holy Spirit. Our life is no longer guided by the criteria of the world, but according to the Spirit of Jesus, because we have been justified by the grace of Christ. As Saint La Salle says:

The first effect that the Holy Spirit produces in a soul that has the happiness of receiving Him is to make it see things in quite a different light from that in which those who live according to the spirit of the world view things.¹²

A radical change takes place because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in us. The way of looking at things changes completely. One no longer looks at things according to the spirit of the world, but according to the spirit of God. Animated and guided by the Spirit, the Brother looks at

everything with the eyes of faith. He lives according to the spirit of faith. And when Saint La Salle speaks about living according to the spirit of faith, he means that the life of a Brother must be animated, guided and renewed by the Holy Spirit. In fact when Saint La Salle speaks of the *spirit of faith*, he speaks of the Holy Spirit.¹³

5. The Process of Justification Is Accomplished by Means of the Church

This mediation occurs through preaching and baptism, among other means. According to Saint Paul, “Faith comes from what is preached, and what is preached comes from the word of Christ.”¹⁴

Saint La Salle says:

It was the spread of Christ’s glory by the preaching of the Gospel that made up all the consolation of this great apostle [Saint Paul], and this must be yours as well, to make God and His Son Jesus Christ known to the flock confided to you.¹⁵

As a follower of Christ, the Brother shares in this mission of the Church. By baptism, he is likewise called to be a herald of Jesus Christ. He fulfills this mission especially when he teaches the message of the Gospel to the pupils confided to his care by God.

In addition to preaching, the Church fulfills its mission of evangelization by means of baptism. Through baptism, we die to the world of sin and we rise to new life in Christ. For Saint La Salle, the Brother has a duty to communicate to his pupils the basic truths of the faith, since, like him, “by baptism, [they] are consecrated to the Most Blessed Trinity.”¹⁶ As someone who is baptized, the Brother has a duty to announce Jesus Christ, since his pupils too have received the grace of baptism.

In his meditations, De La Salle stresses the Church’s role of mediation. The Brother as a baptized person shares in this work. When he shares in this mission, he must remain united with the Church. This union will be shown by obedience to the Pope and the magisterium of the Church.¹⁷ De La Salle’s insistence on this is understandable in the light of the danger offered by Jansenism, so rife at the time. De La Salle was invited at various times to join the Jansenists. Had he done so he would have received considerable financial aid for his undertaking. He rejected these invitations, however, preferring to trust in Divine Providence rather than in money.

6. Animated by the Holy Spirit, We Become Capable of Doing Good

The good that we do does not come from our efforts nor from our abilities; it comes from God’s grace. We are transformed by the Holy Spirit. That is why when a Brother prays he can ask Him:

Come, Holy Spirit, take possession of my heart. Animate all my actions so much that it can be said that is You who are acting and not I; and that I have no life, no movement, no action unless it comes from You.¹⁸

The Brother becomes capable of doing good works because he has been renewed and justified by grace.

Grace is always a gift and a duty. On receiving this grace, a Brother must “look upon everything with the eyes of faith, do everything in the sight of God, and attribute all to God.”¹⁹ In order to do this, “You must act through grace and show that you are moved by the impulse of the Spirit of God.”²⁰

Through the movement of the Holy Spirit, the Brother must seek only God’s glory in the accomplishment of his mission. Seeking the glory of God implies also the renunciation of self. By this renunciation, the Brother can complete in his own body what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. For Saint La Salle, the true disciple of Jesus Christ is the one who shares in the sufferings of the Son of God:

Like him [Saint Ignatius of Antioch], you must bear in mind that you will be a true disciple of Jesus Christ only when you love Him, and when you love suffering for His sake.²¹

Conclusion

In the spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, it is possible to identify the process of justification described by Saint Paul. De La Salle, a doctor of theology, had a thorough knowledge of the teachings of Saint Paul. In addition to knowing them, he admired them also. There are innumerable references to Saint Paul in the *Meditations* and the *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*. By this means, Saint La Salle endeavors to help his Brothers to become aware of their sinful state, so that, conscious of it, they can be more attentive to the grace of God, a grace which renews them, justifies them and brings them out of their sinful state to a new life in Christ. Once made free by the grace of Christ, Brothers can live according to the spirit of faith, and not according to the desires of the flesh. And so the Brother must not “look upon anything but in view of God and must attribute all to God.”²²

Through the action of God’s grace, the Brother as a person leaves his sinful condition to become “a minister of Jesus Christ.”²³ As a minister of Christ, he must seek only the glory of God in his mission of educational service of the poor.

¹ This article was previously published in *Lasalliana* #16 (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1989).

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³ “Example of an Act of Remorse” in *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer by John Baptist de La Salle* as translated by Richard Arnandez FSC and edited by Donald Mouton FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1995), page 72.

⁴ Meditation #197 passim in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* as translated by Richard Arnandez FSC and edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Francis Huether FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994).

- ⁵ “Example of an Act of Application of Our Lord’s Merits” in *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer* (Lasallian Publications, 1995), page 76.
- ⁶ Meditation #26.3 (Lasallian Publications, 1994).
- ⁷ Meditation #3.3 (Lasallian Publications, 1994).
- ⁸ Meditation #3.1 (Lasallian Publications, 1994).
- ⁹ Meditation #194.1 (Lasallian Publications, 1994).
- ¹⁰ “Example of an Act of Faith by considering That Our Lord Has Made Us Children of God” in *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer* (Lasallian Publications, 1995), page 88.
- ¹¹ Meditation #43.2 (Lasallian Publications, 1994).
- ¹² Meditation #44.1 (Lasallian Publications, 1994).
- ¹³ Cf. *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor: The Spiritual Experience and Spiritual Teaching of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* by Michel Sauvage FSC and Miguel Campos FSC and translated by Michael J. O’Connell (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Conference, 1981).
- ¹⁴ Romans 10:17.
- ¹⁵ Meditation #207.2 (Lasallian Publications, 1994).
- ¹⁶ Meditation #46.3 (Lasallian Publications, 1994).
- ¹⁷ Cf. *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle: Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* by Canon Jean-Baptiste Blain, translated by Richard Arandez FSC, and edited by Luke Salm FSC (Landover: MD: Lasallian Publications, 2000), page 737. [From De La Salle’s last testament: “I urge them [the Brothers], above all else, always to show entire submission to the Church, especially in these evil times, and to give proof of this by never separating themselves in anything from our Holy Father the Pope and from the Church in Rome, always remembering that I sent two Brothers to Rome to ask God for the grace that their Society might always be entirely submissive thereto.”]
- ¹⁸ “Example of considering God Present within Us by Grace and the Holy Spirit” in *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer* (Lasallian Publications, 1995), page 38.
- ¹⁹ *Collection of Various Short Treatises* by John Baptist de La Salle, translated by William J. Battersby FSC, and edited by Daniel Burke FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1993), pages 30-31.
- ²⁰ Meditation #45.3 (Lasallian Publications, 1994).
- ²¹ Meditation #102.3 (Lasallian Publications, 1994).
- ²² *Collection of Various Short Treatises* (Lasallian Publications, 1993), pages 30-31.
- ²³ Meditation #195.2 (Lasallian Publications, 1994).