

22. GENTLENESS

Summary:

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1. MORAL ASPECT

“A virtue which moderates anger” Richelet.

Gentleness is a moral virtue. It is the object of the second beatitude (Mtt. 5,4). It is listed fifth among the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Ga 5,22).

1.1. Definition

John Baptist de La Salle gives three definitions of it in the DEVOIRS I: Gentleness which is the opposite of anger is a virtue which makes us support with equanimity the trials which befall us” (Da 187), in DEVOIRS II: “It is a virtue which makes us put with evenness of mind with the defects of others and the trials we have to undergo” (Db 138), and in the GRAND ABREGE: “Gentleness is a virtue which makes us support with equanimity the neighbour’s defects and the misfortunes which come our way” (GA 385).

It demarcates the two fields where this “supernatural quality” is practised: the disposition which hurts us not only when they come from others, but also from life itself. Our “corrupt nature” urges us to fight back the former by sentiments of contempt or hatred, by means of insults, blows, or even murder and the latter through swear words or the rejection of God. Gentleness replaces these aggressive reactions with an attitude of support

made up of patience and resignation. For that reason, it is presented as “the opposite of anger”.

But John Baptist de La Salle comes up with another reason. In agreement with traditional theology, he remarks that the moral virtues are “very numerous” and he distinguishes two groups among them: those which are “ordinarily called cardinal virtues because they are the first and the most important” and those “which are opposed to the seven vices or capital sins” (Da 185). Gentleness has its place in this second group.

But if in the three works quoted above the list of capital sins does not change: “pride, avarice, impurity, envy, gluttony, anger sloth”, the same is not true of the opposite virtues. Their order changes: zeal for the good of the neighbour, in the fourth place — quite sensibly — in Devoirs I, is promoted — quite abnormally — to the second place in Devoirs II and in the Grand Abrégé. Their names vary: a liking for God, for instance, becomes “devotion and diligence”. In particular, their number, differs: Devoirs I gives only six, certainly, through an uncorrected printing error (for sobriety which at first had been omitted later found its definition) whilst the Grand Abrégé offers eight: “Which are the moral virtues opposed to the seven vices or capital sins? They are the following (GA 384). It does not matter; these divergences constitute only a simple question of composition.

1.2. Its importance

John Baptist de La Salle attaches a great importance to gentleness. Everyone has an "obligation" to practise it in the name of religion. The Rules of Decorum and Christian Civility are explicit on this score: "A Christian ...ought to show nothing but gentleness, moderation and wisdom in his behaviour" (RB 48) or "gentleness, humility and respect towards one's neighbour ought always to be evident in our behaviour" (RB 38). He goes into the minutest details such as: "it is very unbecoming to show a wrinkled forehead; ...Take care not to let anything harsh be seen in your appearance; you should rather manifest wisdom, gentleness and good will" (RB 14).

From individual behaviour, he goes on to social relations, whether these occur through life as, for example, during conversation: "It is not in keeping with decorum for you to contradict anyone ...if you are obliged to do so, you should do it in such a mild and courteous way that the one who is corrected may be forced, as it were, to be grateful to you" (RB 222). Or when they are applied in the exercise of authority, e.g. that of the parents: They are obliged to correct, that is to scold and punish their children when they give in to some defect; but then they should do it with gentleness and charity and not angrily and with insults" (Da 125). Or that of the masters: "It is also prudent not to have too open an expression on your face when dealing with inferiors, especially servants, for while you are obliged to treat them with gentleness and consideration, it is also important not to be familiar with them".

1.3. Its fruits

The first fruit to be expected from gentleness is certainly the mastery of self. John Baptist de La Salle, in his DEVOIRS I comments thus on the second beatitude: "Gentle people are those who control themselves so well that far from feeling bitter when they are insulted, they do not bear the least resentment: they possess the earth, because through such behaviour, one easily conquers the whole world" (Da 190). We have now come to the second fruit (the conquest of souls), more important than the first in the Founder's opinion. He

dwells on it in the 2nd point of Meditation 65: "Those possess the whole world who hold men's hearts. Those who are of a gentle and affable disposition do, in fact, easily achieve this. They insinuate themselves into the hearts of all those with whom they converse; they win them over, and obtain from them all that they desire. In this way they conquer all men, and turn them whithersoever they will" (MD 65,2).

The literary inspiration shown in this passage, rare in our author, reveals to what extent he had this subject close to his heart. All the more so since the text goes on, built on the same pattern, to point out a third fruit (the acquisition of virtue), then a fourth (the maintenance of union), a fifth (the mortification of one's passions): "But this is not the only benefit to be derived from gentleness. The chief advantage is that it enables us to acquire all the other virtues. By gentleness, we hold all our passions in check, and prevent them from escaping our grasp. By it we also succeed in preserving charity with all our Brothers" (MD 65,2).

Impossible here not to recall the supplication which, in the Instructions and Prayers for Holy Mass, he suggests at the Agnus Dei: "My God, having asked for peace with you, allow me to request it also with my neighbour; for I will not feel at ease with you unless I am united in love with men: yet I cannot possess this union except through gentleness and patience. Grant me, I beg of you, these two virtues and to speak and act only in a very affable manner with everybody, to support with patience and out of love of you, the offences, insults and affronts which may be addressed to me, not to harm anyone, not to be offended by anything and to be satisfied with all that others may do to me" (I 90).

This passage is all the more interesting because it enumerates in great detail the effects of following the analytic schedule used by the moralists of the period such as Father Julian Hayneufve in his "Meditations for the time of the eight-day retreat": That to know how to deprive oneself, to act, and to encourage others by one's example is to know the whole Gospel and all the moral doctrine of Jesus Christ" (p. 123).

1.4. Its practice

In fact, the Founder considers successively one's actions: "I should speak and act only in a most gentle manner towards everybody"; one's support: "I should endure patiently for your love the wrongs, the abuses and the insults which will be uttered against me"; and finally self-control: "Nothing should upset or shock me" and to conclude on a positive, almost triumphalistic note, which opens the door to mysticism: "I resolve to be satisfied with everything that I may have to endure on the part of others".

Thanks to these several quotations, it may have been possible to note the almost structural link formed and often referred to between gentleness and the other virtues: humility where it has its origin, patience, its condition, gentleness, its external manifestation and charity which is its end.

2. LASALLIAN PASTORAL ASPECT

If gentleness is a characteristic of the Christian, for John Baptist de La Salle it is especially one "of the Brother's own particular virtues", according to the *Recueil* (R XV). Having been instituted to run schools "together and by association" to procure the salvation of children, they ought to practise it for a quadruple reason: in their professional life, where it controls all the relations between teachers and students, in their apostolic life, where it reveals a God of love, who wishes the welfare of every one of his creatures, in their community life, where it guarantees the existence of union and harmony; in their interior life, where it makes them follow Jesus who calls himself "gentle and humble of heart" (Mk 11,29). A study of this virtue in isolation goes to show brilliantly the cohesive depth of the spirituality of St. La Salle.

2.1. The profession

Gentleness is eighth among "The twelve virtues of a good teacher" of which the Founder drew up two lists: one at the end of "Conduct of Schools" (CE 228) and the other in the "Recueil" (R 6). Brother Agathon drew a famous commentary of it which he published, under the same title,

in 1785, and which won great notoriety, if one judges by the number of editions printed, its translations, its diffusion outside the Institute and even the adaptation made of it by State school teachers. It so happens that more than a good third of the book is taken up by gentleness.

For John Baptist de La Salle, the vital point in education was "the need to link gentleness with firmness in the upbringing of children". Experience based on the constant teaching of the saints and the examples they gave us are sufficient evidence that to help those we educate to improve, it is necessary to use in their regard a manner that is at the same time firm and gentle; some however... state openly... that they cannot easily see how these two can be amalgamated in practice. For... if one is too eager to excuse human weakness, and, if out of compassion for the children, they are allowed to do whatever they like, they will become naughty, vicious and dissolute. What is to be done to prevent firmness from degenerating into harshness and meekness into softness and languidness?" (CE 140). John Baptist de La Salle answers: "Show firmness to attain your end and gentleness in the way you do that... You must persevere without nevertheless allowing children to claim impunity and the chance to do whatever they want, for then there will be no room for kindness; you must know however that it consists in that no hint of harshness, anger or passion manifest itself in the reprimands you make, but that you are seen to show the gravity of a father, a compassion full of affection and a certain gentleness albeit deep and efficacious (CE 144).

This rule is couched in general terms. A second completes it after it has passed the test of discernment "for more is needed towards some and more firmness towards others". The first example refers to children who are by nature "gentle and peaceful and who can be corrected by means of gentle personal warnings" (CE 164); those stay away from school "through thoughtlessness, may be induced to attend better through meekness and through gentle persuasion than through correction and harsh methods" (CE 183).

However if the balance between and firmness has to vary according to the temperament of the pupils, it must also be take into account the environment of the school, particularly when the

teacher “needs” to punish. John Baptist de La Salle considers the problem of correction so important that he returns to it mainly three times allotting to it Chapter 8 in the Common Rules, the second part of Chapter 5 in the Conduct of Schools and the eleventh and twelfth Meditations for Retreat time. These texts contain large references to gentleness.

The Common Rules specify that the Brothers should not then and at any other time, call their pupils abusive or unbecoming names... they shall be careful never to touch or strike any one of their pupils with the hand, the fist or the cane and not to repel or push them violently. They will not slap them either on the face or the head or the back. They will be very careful not to pull their ears, nose or hair or to throw the cane at them or any other object to have it returned to them. All these punitive methods should never be resorted to by the Brothers, since they are very unbecoming, contrary to charity and Christian gentleness” (RC 38). These dispositions recall quite obviously the corresponding dispositions of the Rules of Decorum and Christian Civility: “It is very rude, and even shameful, for you to kick anyone, no matter on what part of the body. This is something that cannot be permitted to anyone, not even to a master when dealing with his servants. This kind of punishment characterizes a violent and irrational person and does not become a Christian, who should not entertain or make a display of any sentiments but gentleness, moderation, and wisdom in everything he does” (RB 48).

In the Conduct of Schools it is at the beginning of the Chapter on Corrections that John Baptist de La Salle sets down the general principle on the union of kindness and firmness in education. In the applications he subsequently makes of it, it is worth noting that it is precisely in favour of the pupils most difficult to correct, the “tough ones”, “those who resist and do not put up with any correction, that he suggests the use of gentleness: “the teacher will call him to speak to him and will make him slowly realize and confess his fault, the first one he committed and the more recent one, when he resisted and..., the pupil having received his correction, the teacher will call him to his side, when his anger has subsided, to make him examine his conscience and subsequently confess

his error and ask pardon kneeling down” (CE 162).

The efficacy of gentleness during corrections is recalled in Meditation 204. Using the famous example of the Old Testament (2S 1.7) John Baptist de La Salle remarks: “The result which the wise reproof of Nathan produced in David ought to make you realize how much good the corrections you give your disciples will accomplish, when they are given with gentleness and love (MR 204.3). This word takes on its full meaning because, in the preceding meditation, he credits the topic with its final dimension, the spiritual one: “Those who guide children must reprehend them... to bring them back from wandering and falling into the devil’s trap... according to what Jesus says, everyone who lives in sin is the slave of sin... As teachers, yours is the responsibility to use every possible means to bring those under your guidance into that liberty of the children of God... You must do this by possessing two qualities in your relationship with them. The first is gentleness and patience. The second is prudence in your reproofs and corrections (MR 203.2). But thanks to this passage we have anticipated the next point.

2.2. The example of the saints

John Baptist de La Salle’s preoccupation is to give the pupils a (practical) Christian formation (MR 194.3) namely one inspired by the maxims of the Gospel and orientated towards the acquisition and the exercise of the corresponding virtues. Knowing to what extent gentleness seemed to him characteristic of the disciple of Jesus Christ, we are not surprised to see him recommending the “teaching” of it. So: “Do not forget to make them acquire gentleness, patience (MR 200.3)... suggesting to them the practice of gentleness, humility...” (MR 196.2) and again: “If you wish to do well in your ministry... you must act in such a way that they behave gently towards each other, forgive mutually as God forgave them through Jesus Christ and love each other as Jesus Christ loved them” (MR 198.3). Remarkable for its literary quality, this last quotation is even more so for its mystic significance.

However, the teacher would be wasting his time instilling gentleness into his pupils if this virtue did not permeate all his dealings with him.

First “because the example impresses itself more on the mind and heart of the child than mere words, especially in the case of children whose mind is not able to reflect, for these usually follow the example of their teacher and are prone to copy what they see rather than what they hear” (MR 202.3). But more so as a result of the intrinsic efficacy of gentleness: words and example may impress, question, suggest a reflection or an explanation... as for gentleness, “it wins over the hearts”. An apt example of this is that “of the woman caught in adultery whom Christ converted through his admirable gentleness” (Da 38).

Such a method was used against some martyrs to try to make them apostatize, as the Founder recalls about St. Catherine: “This saint having been accused of being a Christian was brought before the Emperor Maximian, who was then at Alexandria. When he found that no reasons could persuade her to renounce her religion and return to the worship of the false gods, he had recourse to gentleness and promises... (MF 192.3). As for the saintly bishop of Geneva, he dealt with the matter differently: “It was this gentleness and affability shown by St. Francis towards his neighbour that enabled him to convert many souls to God. ...This virtue, in fact, won him the hearts of all who came near him and he used the affection they showed him to lead them to God” (MF 101.3). To encourage his Brothers to convert their pupils, John Baptist de La Salle gives them the same advice: “Is it thus that by your gentleness and wisdom you induce those who are under you to forsake vice and wickedness, and to become pious? These two means, joined to prayer, have often greater effect upon souls than any other measures we can devise” (MF 114.1).

2.3. Brotherly union

The Brothers live in community. They animate the school together and contribute to it the example of their faith and union. Gentleness is therefore needed here as well. It is important that the first to practise it be the Directors. To urge them to do so, John Baptist de La Salle offers them these two examples; that of St. Hilarion who having become disciple of St. Anthony “observed closely his humility towards his brethren in reli-

gion, his severity tempered by gentleness when he corrected them” (MF 180) and that of St. Anselm who “as abbot, was so gentle and charitable towards his religious that he won their hearts” (MF115.3).

Charity must animate the Brothers and permeate all their relationships. For “charity is gentle; it is the second quality of charity according to St. Paul. And truly it is not by scolding or murmuring loudly or by quarrelling that we show love and union... Rather it is by speaking mildly and affably and by humbling oneself before our Brothers for, the Wise Man says, a gentle answer is a quarrel averted; by it, we also succeed in preserving charity with all our Brothers. Never speak except in a mild manner and when you fear to fail in this, remain silent” (MD 65.2).

Meals are taken in silence while a reading takes place. But the Brothers may converse during the recreations which follow. The way to spend them well constitutes “the fourth exterior support of the Institute” (R 6). “For that reason it has been found useful to draw up a collection of a large number of topics of piety which may be used fruitfully during the conversations which the Brothers must have together every day after meals”. And in the section entitled “The virtues which should characterize the Brothers of this Institute, we read about “the union among the Brothers, the self-control, the gentleness and the patience which the Brothers should practise” (R 37 - CL 16.29).

2.4. The life of union with God

John Baptist de La Salle wrote for the Brothers who through their spiritual life were endeavoring to integrate in a radical manner “the community exercises and school work” as directed in the most beautiful and rich Memoir on the Habit (MH 350). Undoubtedly, they only left their “solitude” to go to church or to school, together, walking modestly and with the rosary in their hand. Undoubtedly, their employment was anything but profane and only indirectly did they have contacts with the “World”. Yet, their employment took up most of their time and required on their part a total commitment. And when, on completion of their work, they returned to their “solitude” they

took with them the fatigues and preoccupations of their ministry, burdened with which, they were to resume their spiritual exercises, the chief among them mental prayer. There was (and there still is) a psychological as well as a spiritual dilemma: to keep the “depth of one’s soul” in a state of repose thus leaving the individual free to indulge in contemplation as well as action to serve God and the children. Traditionally this role is allotted to a set of virtues of a pacifying nature among which John Baptist de La Salle gives pride of place to gentleness... However, as a means to acquire and develop it he mentions also: charity, humility, silence, obedience.

One would do well to read in its entirety the second point of Meditation 65 quoted already in part, to learn more about the fruits of gentleness and its role in community life: “Charity is gentle...” (MD 65.2).

The advice given in conclusion of this text: “Never speak except with gentleness and keep silent when you are unable to do so” will be corroborated by the example of St. Francis de Sales who showed such gentleness and tenderness for his neighbour: “Learn from this saint to conquer your passions and not to show any emotion in your words and actions; humility will be of great help as well as silence when someone intends to hurt your feelings” (MF 101.2).

But in this field, it is with regard to obedience that John Baptist de La Salle carries out a most significant synthesis: “We may say with regard to obedience what Solomon said concerning wisdom, namely, that “together with her all blessings came to me”, for he who obeys out of a religious motive possesses all the virtues; he is humble, for one has to be so in order to submit: he is mild, since he does not complain no matter how difficult the order he receives may be; he is silent, for the obedient man loses the use of speech, and applies himself to the execution of what has been commanded without any comment; he is patient for he suffers all, and bears any burden imposed upon him to undertake all things for his neighbour’s good” (MD 12.2).

From these texts we understand to what extent the practice of gentleness implies death to self, a necessary condition if the soul is to be rooted in the divine life. For as Father Nicolas Barré,

among others, teaches, in his *Maximes de Conduite Chrétienne*: “Empty yourself, not for your sake, but for God alone”.

2.5. Adherence to Christ

This “God alone”, was in the XVIIth century embodied in a characteristic spirituality, that of adherence to Christ. It is interesting to note how John Baptist de La Salle finds for it, as well as for kindness, a very appropriate application. After all did not Jesus say: “I am meek and humble of heart” (Mk 11,29), “My yoke is sweet and my burden light” (Mk11,30)?

John Baptist de La Salle twice quotes the first of these verses, in the Explanation of the Method of Meditation (EM 96) and in that famous Meditation 65, half way through the second point. As for the second, he paraphrases it in one “aspiration” (to use his own word” which he puts forward in the Prayers for Holy Mass, at the moment of the Gradual: “Your law is my yoke, but it holds nothing but sweetness; it is a burden which is not heavy; see, my spirit and taste, my heart, how sweet the Lord is, how lovable” (I 77).

It is a theme the Founder liked, so he comes back to it often. Thus: “The baptized must carry courageously the yoke of the commandments of God and the evangelic law which, though difficult for a corrupt nature, is made easy and sweet to carry through grace and the unction which is given in holy baptism” (Da 224). So, too in the case of confirmation: “This cross is made with holy oil to signify that since the cross is difficult to carry, this sacrament provides us with a special power and grace to make it sweet for us” (Da 238). In fact, it is our whole life, (the burden of the day) (Mk 20,12) that Jesus lightens and eases, and appropriately thanks to his Cross: “...having been by the Cross freed from sin... we must feel confident that, if we love him in union with Jesus Christ, all our misfortunes in this life, will be rendered sweet and pleasant and we shall be really happy, having found our Paradise here on earth” (I 276).

In order to acquire gentleness, one must first of all ask for it: “If the latter wishes to control his anger and practise the virtue of gentleness ...he will find an easy means to do it through prayer”

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St Jean-Baptiste de La Salle: CL. 10 à 25.

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Translated from French by Bro. James CALLEJA

(Da 414). But the Founder offers him another means more powerful in his view: "To meditate on the great gentleness of Our Lord manifested on many occasions, especially when on the Cross he prayed to his Father for his enemies" (Db 133).

He winds up his thought: "We should imitate particularly... his gentleness" (DC 191), "the gentleness which Our Lord Jesus Christ manifested in his Passion" (DC 169). And he gives an example of this: "In spite of the hatred the Jews felt towards him and the vicious plans they concocted against him, Jesus does not refrain from talking to them about himself with the greatest possible gentleness" (MD23,2). However such imitation would be fruitless without "affection": "Experience how kind the Lord is" (MD 12.1). In this manner, the person of Christ is for the Brothers, an incentive, a food, a model.

The word "gentleness" has as yet a last meaning when used in the plural: the spiritual favours which God grants a soul to console it. The Founder knows this from experience. Let us read once more the second point of Meditation 18: "As God makes use of this consolation to sustain a soul... it should accept this comfort in the simple view of God's good pleasure, without taking com-

placency in the sensible satisfaction experienced. The three Apostles who accompanied Our Lord on Mount Thabor failed in this for, being as yet little skilled in matters pertaining to the interior life, they dwelt more upon the sweetness they tasted than on the greatness and goodness of God" (MD 16.2). To this negative illustration, he opposes that of St. Augustine who, no sooner was he converted, "than he found such sudden indescribable gentleness and pleasures in the renunciation of the very pleasures of the worldly" (123.2) and that of St. Philip Neri who "sometimes felt so overwhelmed with heavenly sweetness and consolation that he was obliged to exclaim: "Enough, Lord, enough".

John Baptist de La Salle came across quite a few occasions on which he had to practise gentleness. Blain supplies some examples involving the Saint's relationship with sinners or protestants whom he was trying to convert, with the Brothers or with his enemies (cf. CL 8, pp. 338, 370, 379, 466...). However, can we not assume that he is taking us into his confidence when he writes in the explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer: "Oh my God, how much I need simplicity, humility and gentleness" (EM 81)!

Complementary Themes:

Love, Association, Decorum, Heart, Conversation, Conversion, Correction, School, Pupil, Employment, Exercices, Humility, Teacher, Ministry, Obedience, Mental prayer, Peace, Salvation, Tenderness, Union.