

HOW DID ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE
SEE THE VOCATION AND MISSION
OF THE CHRISTIAN TEACHER?
(1/2)

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1. De La Salle's clearest and most inspiring answer to this question is to be found in his **Meditations for the Time of Retreat** (MTR). This series of sixteen meditations (two for each of the eight days of annual retreat made by the early Brothers), written at the end of the Founder's life, first published in Rouen in 1730, was neglected until it was rediscovered in the 1960s. MTR is now regarded as probably the most valuable written reflection of De La Salle on his own spiritual journey, and on the vocation of a Christian teacher in De La Salle's experience and thought.

2. Principal reasons for rediscovery of MTR in the 1960s:

– **Vatican II** (1962-65) asked religious institutes to renew their spirit and mission in the modern world by rediscovering the charism of their founder. This was seen as part of that *aggiornamento* of the church which was the principal concern of the Council. At the same time, Vatican II emphasised the place of scripture, community and spirituality in Catholic life, and reaffirmed the vocation and mission of lay people in the apostolate of the church.

– **The 1966 General Chapter of the Brothers** set out to examine and renew the life of the Institute in response to Vatican II's call to renewal. The process was helped considerably by the doctoral research of Brothers Maurice Hermans, Michel Sauvage and Luis Varela into the origins of the Institute. A very important post-Chapter development was the doctoral dissertation of Brother Miguel Campos: "*L'Itineraire Evangelique de Saint J.B. de La Salle et le recours a l'Ecriture dans ses Meditations pour les Temps de la Retraite*". A presentation in English of the main conclusions of Campos's study was published by Brother Edwin Bannon in **De La Salle: a Founder as Pilgrim**. (1988)

– **The revision of the FSC Rule** (1986 General Chapter) and the emphasis on "shared mission" (1993 General Chapter) have provided further impetus to rediscovering the relevance of Lasallian spirituality in the post-Vatican II church and world. The original 1730 edition of MTR was dedicated "*for the use of all persons who are engaged in the education of youth, and particularly for the retreat which the Brothers of the Christian Schools make during vacation*".

– **A new translation into contemporary English** by Brother Augustine Loes of MTR appeared in 1975. It was introduced by a 44-page essay by Miguel Campos, including a description of the text of MTR; a section on the content of the Meditations (in relation to De La Salle's own life); MTR as a call to contemporary followers of De La Salle; emphasis on the place of Scripture in MTR; certain "limitations" of reading a 17th century document in a 20th century culture; adapting the charism of De La Salle in responding to the needs of contemporary society. The present introduction and summary are based, largely, on this 1975 edition of MTR.

3. "Spirituality refers to the sorts of matters a person thinks are significant in life" and why. (Michael Warren). Christian Spirituality sees this significance in relation to the Spirit of the Risen Christ present in us now. Lasallian Spirituality relates this meaning to the experience and reflection of De La Salle and his early followers. MTR is a moving example of these three types of spirituality.

4. Lasallian spirituality relates especially to:

- De La Salle's discovery of the call of God to serve the poor through education;
- the living-out of this call in fraternal community and in the service of young people;
- the acquisition of four "interior supports", namely the presence of God in daily life; the spirit of faith to which awareness of God's presence gives rise; daily personal prayer which fosters awareness of God's presence; personal recollection motivated by the spirit of zeal which overflows from these convictions.

5. "Faith" is used in four senses: what Christians believe about God (head faith); the close relationship of trust between a believer and God (heart faith); the effect and influence of Christian beliefs and values on a person's everyday life and mission (hands faith); the 'faithfulness' of translating these ideas and experiences into life-long fidelity to God's presence in one's life. Faith and zeal are inseparable in DLS's experience.

6. All these points are emphasised in De La Salle's description of the ministry of Christian teaching in MTR. The word "ministry" is used 26 times in these reflections, and the word "zeal" more than forty times. Commentators are impressed by the way De La Salle's Meditations are steeped in Scripture, especially in the writings of St. Paul, known to De La Salle through his familiarity with the Scriptures but quoted in a modern translation. As Campos writes, *"In one sense Scripture does not come to him from outside, but the words which he cites come from a "gut level" - from the lived reality of the life he has lived and which he has contemplated in the light of faith."*

7. The style of the sixteen MTR is interesting, in that the reflections are addressed to individual readers in the second person, appealing to personal experience, and seeking to inspire prayer and reflection on the day-to-day realities of their life and vocation.

As Campos says, *"These meditations go to the heart of the Brother's life, inviting them to consider, in the spirit of faith and zeal, the actual lived experience of their Institute, the experience of God discovered in their day-to-day relations with students. When St. De La Salle invites the Brothers to consider their work in the schools, he is not engaging them in considerations that are historical, theological or pedagogical. He is not urging the Brothers with abstract reasons derived from theological or pedagogical theories, nor even from the Bible. Rather, he invites the Brothers to deepen their understanding, through contemplation and prayer, of the purpose of their being Brothers, not really what they are living for but for whom they exist as Brothers. The Founder is helping them to study the substance of their daily experience in the educational service they provide and to see the gospel dimensions of this service and all of its demands ... inviting the Brother to break through the walls of space and time, revealing to him the reality of the mystery of God at the very heart of this way of life."*

A challenge for Lasallians in the closing years of the twentieth century is surely to apply Campos's reading of Lasallian spirituality to all Christian teachers (whether they are Brothers or not) who share a common mission in education today.

A summary of the sixteen Meditations for the Time of Retreat follows on the next article, 33-11-B-153.

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