

52. RENEWAL: "RÉNOVATION"

Summary:

1. The repetition of acts. – 2. "Interior renewal": attitudes and spirit. – 3. From "the old man" to "the new man" in the image of Christ.

From the evidence of contemporary dictionaries, the use of the word "rénovation" was not common in the Founder's time.¹ In its place the word "renouvellement" was used along with the corresponding verbs — "renouveler" and "se renouveler" — but, in fact, neither of these nouns features often in the writings of the Founder, each appearing only three times even if the verbs are more frequently used. However, the concept of renewal is broader than that indicated by the two nouns — "rénovation" and "renouvellement" — and, consequently, to have a proper appreciation of De La Salle's concept of renewal it is necessary to consider other complementary ideas such as, for example, "conversion", "the imitation of Christ", "inspiration", "the movement of the Spirit", "evangelical perfection", or "retreat". In order to avoid repetition we will indicate here the meaning which was usually given to these two nouns more directly related to the idea of renewal, presenting three levels which progressively deepen in meaning.

1. THE REPETITION OF ACTS

The first level, which is the most superficial in that it simply expresses a mechanical action, refers to the *repetition of acts*. The multiplication of acts

of piety was a characteristic which was to continue until Vatican II. Clear indications of this can be seen in the "Rules which I have imposed on myself" in, for example, numbers 5, 17, 18 and 19. However, it needs to be emphasized that this practice of the repetition of acts was not pursued as an end in itself but rather as a means of focusing attention on God. In other words, its value was in the fact that it was a "means" and nothing more. Thus, for example, in the case of pupils, the frequent remembrance of the presence of God had, as its objective, "to create in them the habit of thinking about God... and disposing them to offer all their actions to him so that these would be blessed by him" (CE 76). In the case of the Brothers, the renewal of the presence of God, as indicated in the Rule, was justified by the fact that they were "to think only of Him and of what He commands..." (RC II, 7) and that it would help them to "acquire the spirit of faith and be directed by it" (R 83) as well as "to perform their actions with God in mind" (R 93).

2. INTERIOR RENEWAL: ATTITUDES

The second level of "renewal" refers to the attitudes or to the "spirit" which moves us interio-

rly. the justification of this second level is given by De La Salle in the "Collection of Short Treatises" where he speaks of "renewal" as one of the "Means which the Brothers of the Christian Schools should adopt in order to perform their actions well": "...The practice of interior renewal is all the more necessary given that, in itself, our nature tends towards carelessness, and that we easily break the best resolutions which we have taken, those which we committed ourselves to on entering God's service..." (R 152). Perhaps in order to understand the insistence of the Founder on the necessity of "interior renewal", proposed in this second level, allusion has to be made to the mentality of the French School with regard to its belief in the radical weakness of human nature² which was strongly influenced by St Augustine but which also had deep Pauline and Johannine roots.

Bearing in mind this tendency of "human nature towards carelessness", De La Salle proposed, for example, the "renewal of the resolutions which we have taken" (Da 301, 325; EM 123; R 230), the "renewal of fervour and of piety" (Dc 67, 104, 111), "our renewal of the grace of Confirmation" (Dc 182) and "the promises of our Baptism" (Dc 200) as well as "the daily renewal of the offering (of ourselves) to God and the consecration of all our actions to him..." (MF 104,2). Moreover, the frequent "examens" and "collections" which he proposed were also directed towards this renewal, as was the annual retreat (R 145-146, 151) and the practice of frequent ejaculatory prayer which "enkindles and sustains the fire of God's love in the *soul* which, from time to time, weakens given the vulnerability of our mind and heart..." (R. 121).

3. FROM "THE OLD MAN" TO "THE NEW MAN" IN THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

This third level touches the most radical meaning of "renewal" which is "to reestablish something to its original state, to revive it, to resurrect it, to make it new", according to the dictionaries previously quoted. This "renewal", given that it refers to new life, involves a death, that of the "old" or the "exterior man": "... As St Paul says, it is necessary that the outer human nature be destroyed in

you so that the inner nature be renewed day by day..." (MD 2,1). As is frequent in De La Salle, the reference to St Paul provides the doctrinal base for this third level which becomes, for the Brother, the renewal of the spirit of his vocation. In this way, in the meditation for 31st December, which is based on the symbolism of the dying year giving way to the new, he asserts: "... Rid yourselves to-day of the old self and put on the New Man, as St Paul exhorts you, and pray to God, as you are encouraged by the same Apostle, that the spirit of your vocation and of your profession will be renewed tomorrow" (MF 92,3). With regard to this interior renewal, the religious habit acts as a sign: "... Search your hearts to see if... in taking on a new habit your heart has been renewed..." (MD 60,1). De La Salle does not suggest the "renewal" of the interior man in the sense of something final but rather as a response to a permanent process since "a heart which is not inspired by a renewed life and by a life of grace" is cut off from "all interior movements of the spirit of God" (MD 32,1).

But man is not the source of interior renewal — it is the Holy Spirit, given as a gift from God and from whom it must be asked. Such a prayer is frequently used by De La Salle as, for example, when he invites the Brothers to "... Frequently repeat these sacred words with the Church: Send forth your Holy Spirit to give new life and to renew the face of the earth..." (MD 42,3; cf. EM 52; E 21: I 180, 183, 203). And in what does interior renewal consist? It consists in nothing more or less than in the following of Jesus. It is the Spirit who produces in us the identification with Christ (cf. MD 22,2) who has "come into this world to renew all things and to change all flesh into spirit" (Da 443). With regard to being "ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ", his "representatives" in our ministry, De La Salle exhorts us to; "... Give yourselves frequently to the Spirit of Our Lord so that what you do is done for Him — absolutely renouncing your own will..." (MR 195,2). This, without doubt, is the corner stone of the spirituality of the French School: "the objective is total communion with Jesus"³ which De La Salle invites the Brothers to express in that proclamation of permanent renewal which is the signal of the La-sallian community: "... Live Jesus in our hearts" (RC XXVII, 1).

This ideal of Christocentric renewal is abundantly clear in De La Salle's work as much with regard to pupils — "Ensure that they often think of Jesus... so that their every breath is in him..." (MF 103,2) — as with the Brothers — "How happy you should be living in a vocation in which, through frequent communion, you can always be with Jesus Christ, united with Him, possessing his spirit and acting only for Him!" (MD 54,3).⁴

¹ Cf. FURETIÈRE, A., *Dictionnaire Universel*, p. 1701. RICHELET, P., *Nouveau Dictionnaire François*, Amsterdam 1709, p. 61. *Dictionnaire Universel François et Latin*, Paris 1721, p. 1175.

² Cf. DEVILLE, R., *L'École française de Spiritualité*, Annexe 2.

³ ID. See BÉRULLE, *Letters*, vol. III, p. 551: *Give yourselves totally to the Spirit of Jesus...*, quoted by CAMPOS-SAUVAGE, *AEP.*, p. 209, note 229.

⁴ See the two meditations for Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday where De La Salle encourages us to conform to Christ beginning with his death and resurrection (MD 28 and 29).

Complementary themes:

Action of God; Brother's Dress; Conversion; Disciples; Imitation of Christ; Inspiration (Movements of the Holy Spirit); Jesus Christ; Ministry; Retreat.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. CAMPOS, M., and SAUVAGE, M., *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor*, pp. 219-241, English translation, Romeoville, 1981.
2. DEVILLE, R., *L'École française de Spiritualité*, Paris, Desclée, 1987.
3. GALLEGO, S., *San Juan Bautista de La Salle*, Vol II, BAC, Madrid, 1986.

Bro. Antonio BOTANA

Translated from Spanish by Bro. Aidan KILTY