

12. CONVERSION

Summary:

1. The word. – 2. The plan of salvation. – 3. Christ's mission. – 4. The Brothers, ministers of Christ. 4.1. His instruments. 4.2. The imitation of Christ. 4.3. Humility and Witness. 4.4. The spirit of Jesus. 4.5. The word. 4.6. Witness. 4.7. Prayer. 4.8. Persecutions. – 5. The aims of the Christian school.

1. THE WORD.

The word CONVERSION is used to express either the passage from unbelief to the Faith, or the passage from a state of sin to that of grace. St. John Baptist de La Salle makes use of these two meanings but that which concerns us more particularly is the second: "You do not have, it is true, pagans to convert; you are however obliged by your profession to teach children the mysteries of our religion and to communicate to them the spirit of christianity, and that is no less a gift than the conversion of infidels" (MF 109.3).

2. THE PLAN OF SALVATION.

As a Doctor in Theology, St. John Baptist de La Salle knows all too well that conversion is the work of God, the fruit of his plan of salvation for all men: "My God, you are the only one who can really touch a heart..." (I. 58). "You say, my God, that heaven exults with joy when a sinner is converted" (I. 213). He basis himself thus on a strong sentiment of faith which prompts him to write, referring to God the Father: "He protests in the Holy Scripture that he does not wish the death of the sinner, but rather his conversion, his life and his salvation" (EM 69).

3. CHRIST'S MISSION.

The will to save mankind finds its realisation

in the person of the Incarnate Word, the Son of God.¹ "His sole aim was the salvation of souls" (Da 33); "It was always with one of these ends in view that Jesus Christ Our Lord behaved in all the visits He made whether it was to convert souls to God, as when He visited Zachaeus, or to bring the dead back to life... or to heal the sick... although He only performed these miracles to win hearts to God" (RB 160); "because He had come, as he Himself states, to convert sinners and urge them to do penance" (Da 32).

This mission,² initiated during His earthly life, goes on in glory, notably through the action of the sacraments: "It is the advantage I enjoy through Holy Communion when having Jesus Christ in my body... I sometimes recall what He suffered to save me; at other times, He reminds me of His assiduous and continuous prayers to His Father and the zeal He shows for my complete conversion" (I.275).

4. THE BROTHERS, MINISTERS OF CHRIST.

4.1. Instruments:

In the Church, Jesus calls also other men to make them take part in His "work" (MD 7.1 -MR 196.1). The Brothers, who are His associates, must be "convinced" that initiative and apostolic fruitfulness depend solely on God and that they are only "Instruments which owe their ability to move towards Him (MR 196), following in this way the

example of the Precursor: “St. John³ wishes to attribute to Jesus-Christ all the honour of the conversion of souls at which he himself was toiling indefatigably and without respite, said that he was only a voice...” (MD 3.1). “Is it not, in fact, wrong to attribute to oneself a work such as the preservation of innocence in children, and the conversion of souls, since this is something which pertains directly to God and to those whom He employs, who should be entirely consecrated to His service, having continual recourse to Him in order to accomplish so great a mission?” (MD 62.1).

4.2. The imitation of Christ.

Knowing therefore that they can do nothing without Him, their main care will be to imitate Him. On the other hand, “He Himself wanted his disciples to witness all the conversions He had made, so that having seen Him at work, they would in all that they undertook win souls to God, learn from and conform to His example” (MR 196.2). And the Founder concludes with a reference to the role of the Brother towards his pupils: “As you take his place, hold yourselves responsible as you have the same mission,⁴ and ask him the graces necessary to bring about the conversion of their hearts” (MD 6.2).

4.3. Humility and obedience.

Now Jesus Christ prepared Himself through submission and obedience to accomplish the great work of the redemption of men and the conversion of souls” (MD 7.1). Similarly, “a life of abjection⁵ and anonymity was... that which the Eternal Father had destined for Jesus Christ until the time He began to preach his Gospel and the conversion of souls, which was the chief reason for his coming” (MD 6-2).

That is why the Founder insists so much on humility and obedience, inseparable virtues which he lays down as a foundation on which his Brothers should be formed and the very exercise of their apostolic life. For “it is to the humble that God gives his graces most abundantly to convert souls, and Jesus Christ explains this well when He says that the only thing He suggests by way of lesson to his holy Apostles, is that they practise humility of

heart to show them that it would make their ministry for the conversion of souls more successful” (MF 79.2).

4.4. The spirit of Jesus.

However, “It would not suffice in order to fulfil the functions of your ministry towards the children, only to follow the example of Jesus Christ in His conduct and the conversion of souls, if you do not adopt His views and His intentions. As He Himself says, He only came on earth, so that men might have life and have it abundantly... That must also be your intention when you instruct your pupils to act in such a way that they lead a Christian life and that your words be for them spirit and life: instruct your pupils⁶ to lead a Christian life and that your words will be for them spirit and life:

1. because they will be produced by the Spirit of God residing in you;

2. because they will provide them with the Christian spirit and that, possessing this spirit which is the spirit of Jesus Christ Himself, they will live this genuine life which is so advantageous for man that it will certainly lead him to eternal life” (MR 196.3).

4.5. The Word.

Because of its spiritual efficacy, St. John Baptist de La Salle recommends the privileged use of the Bible, “this divine word which also is able to so separate the flesh and the spirit and is so necessary to effect the full conversion of a soul” (MF 159.1). He lends more strength to this advice by using the example of St. Bartholomew, Apostle: “to imbibe fully the Gospel truths, he always carried with him in his travels the gospel of St. Matthew, and therein he placed all his trust for the salvation of the souls he converted in such large numbers” (MF 159.1). Nevertheless, discernment must be shown for “to have the gift of tongues means to be able to speak in such a way as to draw souls to God, to bring about their conversion, and to say to each what is most befitting. Souls are not all drawn in the same way, and it is necessary to know how to deal with each in order to lead it to give itself entirely to God” (MD 64.2).

4.6. The witness.

Yet these counsels⁷ would not bear the fruit one would expect from them if they did not rest on the example given by a deeply Christian life: "More than four thousand people followed Jesus Christ in the desert, drawn by the example of His holy life and by the zeal which He showed for the conversion of souls in His fervent sermons" (MD 59.1). This consideration causes the Founder to utter a cry of enthusiasm: "Oh! how strong and efficacious is example to convert souls and make them progress in virtue!" (MF 180.1).

4.7. The prayer.

The Apostolate is also made fruitful by Prayer. In his RECUEIL, St. John Baptist de La Salle puts this question to the Brothers: "Do you pray for the Church, for your Superiors, for your Benefactors, for your friends and enemies, for the conversion of souls, particularly for those for whom you are responsible?" (RD 102). He remarks on this subject: "You have two kinds of children to instruct: those who are idlers⁸ and inclined to evil, and those who are good or who, at least, have a tendency to good. Pray continually for both after the example of St. Marcellinus, and more especially for those who are especially prone to wickedness. Try to preserve the good, and confirm them in the practice of virtue, but your chief efforts and your most fervent prayers should be directed to winning to God the hearts of those who lean towards vice (MF 186.3). Consider Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd of the Gospel... and ask of Him the graces necessary to bring about the conversion of their hearts" (MR 196.1).

4.8. Persecutions.

Salvation comes through the Cross. In the spiritual sphere, God draws the greatest benefit from trials borne for Him: "That is the normal consequence of the trials which are undergone by those who toil to save souls. The greater their difficulties in the apostolic field, the greater also are the conversions God operates through their ministry and the more efficacious their apostolate for the salvation of souls" (MF 126.2).

5. THE FINALITY OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL.

Very curiously, we find once more this literary symmetry in two other texts of the Founder combining the apostolic finality of the school to these two themes dear to him: the spirit of childhood and tenderness.. Here they are: "Do you wish to convert and easily win over to God your disciples? Become children like them, not in prudence, but in cleverness, as St. Paul says. The more you humble yourself, the more also will you like to show little consideration for and hold dear the trials and humiliations aroused against you, to that extent will you touch the hearts of those whom you instruct and encourage them to live truly Christian lives" (MF 79.2). "Strive to manifest as much kindness and love for the children whom you instruct as St. Barnabas showed for those whom he sought to convert. The greater the tenderness you show for the members of Jesus Christ and of the Church, the more wonderful will be the effects of grace which God produces in them" (MF 134.2).

We cannot think of a better conclusion than the following: "As a reward for so much good for this service which He values so highly, God gives all those who work indefatigably to save souls, two kinds of rewards in this world. First an abundance of graces for themselves. Secondly a vaster ministry and a greater facility to bring about the conversion of souls" (MR 207.1).

¹ St. John Baptist de La Salle employs this formula five times only (cf. MD 1.1 - MD 50.2 - WM 65 - 1.52 - Da 86). It is to be found also in MF 168, which is not the Founder's.

² JBS employs this word only five times and never with reference to Christ. In this case, he prefers "Oeuvre" or "ouvrage".

³ In the third part of the *Devoirs du Chrétien*, JBS advises "to celebrate well the feast of the birth of St. John the Baptist, we must ... thank God who has sent this saint on earth to bring down the spirit of penance and zeal for the salvation of sinners..." (Dc 229).

⁴ Today we would say "to do likewise".

⁵ The word "abjection" expressed in the XVIIth century a very humiliating social status. In religious language, it expresses the sentiment of deep humility experienced by a creature in the presence of God. In current usage, it refers to the lowest grade on the social scale, the scum. Did not St. Paul write: "we have become the refuse of the world and until now the uni-

versal scum" (1 Col. 4.13). There is implied in it, a depreciative note. It is only recently that the meaning of the word has changed to "scorned" "contemptible".

⁶ It is only in the Meditations (for the Sundays, for Feasts and Retreat Time) that St. JBS uses this word when referring to pupils. He underlines in this way the apostolic character of school. In like manner, the teachers are called Brothers. And the profession becomes a ministry. Pedagogy becomes "pastoral": You are the substitutes of the shepherds of the Church" (MD 61.3), "having taken the place of their fathers, their mothers and their pastors... You who hold the place of fathers

and pastors of souls" (MR 202.3).

⁷ In their "instructions" the Brothers must have no other purpose than the conversion of their pupils, following the example of St. Dominic: "The love which this saint had for his neighbour produced in him an ardent zeal for the instruction and the conversion of those who lived a licentious life" (MF 150.2).

⁸ This word is employed to indicate a free-thinker who has emancipated himself from the laws of the Church. St. John Baptist de La Salle calls him impious and worldly. Debauchery brings about disorder, dissoluteness and vice.

Complementary Themes:

Apostle, Goodness, God, Disciple, Church, Child, Holy Spirit, State, Example, Faith, Formation, Humility, Instruction, Joy, Ministry, Mission, Mystery, Prayer, Salvation, Truth, Zeal.

GENERAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dictionnaire de l'Académie, Paris 1694.

P. RICHELET: *Dictionnaire français*, Amsterdam 1709.

A. FURETIÈRE: *Dictionnaire universel des mots français*, La Haie 1701.

G. CAYROU: *Le français classique*, Paris 1948.

R. BRISEBOIS: *Etude de mots du vocabulaire lasallien*.

Bro. Jacques GOUSSIN

Translated from French by Bro. James CALLEJA

12B. THE CONVERSION PROCESS

Summary:

1. Conversion according to the Bible, A.T. & N.T. – 2. Conversion according to De La Salle: 2.1. To convert; 2.2. Conversion; 2.3. The dynamic of conversion; 2.4. The object of conversion; 2.5. The means of conversion; 2.6. The state of life of the converted person.

I. CONVERSION ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE

When anybody wishes to change his way of life, he goes through a process of interior evaluation which includes making a judgement on his outlook and on his former attitudes. The outcome of all this, is an attempt to change his life for the better and as completely as possible.

This process of a person's interior change, which has exterior repercussions, is expressed in the New Testament (N.T.) by three groups of words which deal with three distinct aspects: EPISTREPHŌ, METAMELOMAI, METANOIA. The first and last words mean "to turn around", "to look behind" and they refer to the conversion of a person. This presupposes, in the language of the N.T., a complete change of life under the influence of the Holy Spirit. METAMELOMAI is more concerned with the feeling of repentance for mistakes, for sin, for broken promises and for debts, and in this way, it also contains the sense of "looking behind", but it does not always include the sense of leading man to turn around to God. EPISTROPHŌ, is, probably, the most extensive concept because it includes FAITH. On many occasions we meet "pisteuō" (I believe) used expressly with METANOIA, as faith is the complement of repentance.¹

The foundation of all these terms in the Old Testament (O.T.) is SUB which means "to turn backwards", "to return", "to change direction",

"to give up...". In the religious context, CONVERSION has two fundamental meanings which are complementary to each other: *a*) turning away from (aversio); and *b*) turning towards (conversio). Hence Saint Augustine defines sin: "aversio a Deo et conversio ad creaturas".² This enables us to define sanctity, the object of conversion, as "aversio a creaturis et conversio ad Deum".

Conversion is an essential dimension of the Christian life which is living in communion with God through Jesus Christ. The object of conversion is to place the person towards God, on the road to sanctity, in the quest for the fullest possible communion with the Lord.

In the Old Testament, conversion has, basically, three essential elements: *a*) turning to Yahweh and placing all one's confidence in Him (cf. Os. 14, 4; Jer. 3, 22-23; Is. 10, 21-22); *b*) listening to the Law of Yahweh and acting in conformity with Him (Os. 6, 1-6) which implies welcoming one's poor brother and not turning a deaf ear to his needs (Is. 11, 14; Sl. 72, 2); *c*) turning away from all evil, from whatever is contrary to God (Is. 1, 16; Ez. 18, 31 & foll.; Jer. 36, 3).³

The New Testament opens with John the Baptist preaching conversion as necessary for receiving the Messiah. Jesus begins his Messianic Ministry, calling sinners to conversion (cf. Mk. 1, 15; Mt. 4, 17). Conversion is an essential aspect of the Kingdom which He came to establish, in His role as Son of the God of Salvation, the Messiah. Jesus makes it clear that what is fundamental for Him is

the change of heart, and consequently of life, towards God, to His Plan of Salvation. This change of life makes the person pure and open to God, like a child (cf. Mt. 18, 3) and at the same time, places the person within the dynamism of “seeking the Kingdom of God and His Justice” (Mt. 6, 33), that is to say, to live according to the New Law.

Conversion — which implies a radical change of life in the moral sense and includes the active participation of the person, with his dedicating himself entirely to Him in an attitude of complete confidence — is preceded, according to the Bible, by the initiative of the Lord. He anticipates the sinner, seeks him out, calls on him to abandon sin and to turn to God. The Gospel gives us clear examples of this divine initiative, as in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, and in the meeting of Jesus with the sinful woman and with Zacheus (cf. Mt. 9, 10-13; Lk. 15, 2; Lk. 7, 36-60; Lk. 19, 5-9).

The Early Church, faithful to the mission of Jesus, made the call to Conversion an essential facet of its ministry. The Apostles preached conversion when announcing the Gospel of the Kingdom (cf. Mk. 6, 12; Lk. 24, 47). In the Church, the sign of Conversion a sign of a radical change of life, of rejecting sin and accepting Jesus Christ, a sign, as well, of the forgiveness of sins is Baptism. In the state of sin after Baptism, the person encounters, through repentance and penance, God’s mercy and forgiveness. It is another dimension of Conversion (cf. Heb. 8, 22; Jas. 5, 19; 2 Cor 7, 9-12; Tim. 2, 25; Acts 2, 16 & 21; cf. 3, 3-19; Heb. 17, 30).

In relation to the Old Testament, the New Testament enriches the scope of Conversion with a new element which is the “new relationship with God, the divine sonship of the believer in and through Jesus”. The break with the “old man”, dominated by sin (*aversio*), acquires another dynamic which is the “putting on the new man”, in the likeness of Jesus Christ (cf. Col. 3, 5-17) and the commitment to Him in establishing the Kingdom of God (*conversio*). This demands a radical change of life, of the whole of one’s life, through the action of the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt. 18, 3; Lk. 14, 33; Lk. 15, 1; Jn. 12, 40; Heb. 26, 18-20; 1 Pet. 2, 25).

2. CONVERSION IN THE WRITINGS OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

St. John Baptist De La Salle (France 1651-1719) was influenced in his theological training by Thomism; in his pastoral training by the Tridentine reforms; in his spiritual training by the French school of spirituality, mainly the Sulpician. His writings show that he was very familiar with Holy Scripture, with the Fathers of the Church, with the writers of his time and with the Lives of the Saints. Having made a very brief presentation of the usage of the verb to convert and of the word conversion, we shall linger over De La Salle’s teachings on the dynamic of conversion, its purpose and the means of conversion, ending with some traits of the converted soul according to the ideal of the Holy Founder.

2.1. The verb TO CONVERT

When we analyse the writings of De La Salle, we find that the meaning he gives to the verb convert is very diversified, depending on the kind of theme and concept that he wishes to express. Without claiming to deal exhaustively with all the distinct meanings, we shall look at some examples.

2.1.1. *acts, things, changed and transformed habits*

“Jesus changed water into wine” (MD 8, 3); “such acts... change into acts of self-will” (MD 11, 2); “...into dust you will return” (MD 16, 3); “they become one of the best means” (MD 17, 1; MF 126, 3); “You have made the house of God into a den of thieves” (MD 62, 1; MD 77, 2); “cities would become deserts” (MF 105, 1); “to change your habits” (MF 190, 2); “faults become habits” (MR 203, 2).

2.1.2. *“good” positions and attitudes changed into “bad”*

“Would turn this same grace into a source of perdition” (MD 5, 1); “become the enemy of God and the slave of the devil” (MD 51, 2); “to make the house of God into a den of thieves” (MD 62, 1; MD 77, 2).

2.1.3. *infidels, pagans and sinners transformed into true Christians*

“You do not have to convert infidels” (MF 109, 3); “...great force for converting many people” (MF 131, 3); “he converted large numbers of heretics” (MF 126, 2); “...he succeeded in converting more than one hundred thousand heretics” (MF 150, 2); “...publicans and sinners who were converted by the Lord” (MF 167, 1); “...zeal in converting the infidels” (MF 168, 2; 109, 3; 135, 2).

2.1.4. *persons, souls, hearts... transformed for God*

“Jesus converted many souls to God” (Devoirs I, 36); “St. Peter converted three thousand people” (Devoirs II, 63; cf. Devoirs II, 54; MF 139, 3); “convert our hearts to you, O, Lord” (Instr. 58); “Touch and convert a heart” (Instr. 179); “God gives his grace to convert souls” (MF 79, 2).

2.2. The Word CONVERSION

Throughout his extensive writings, St. John Baptist De La Salle uses the word CONVERSION in its Biblical sense, as a radical change, a transformation of heart, mind and attitudes, making a complete break with sin and with anything connected with it (the sense of *aversio*), in order to allow oneself to be led unconditionally by the will of God, that is to say, to live with, in, through and for God, for his glory. In doing this, the person seeks sanctity and his own salvation. To achieve this, he will take the necessary means.

We can see several examples of this in the writings of De La Salle: “due only to a change of heart” (MD 4, 2); “busy yourself with the conversion of souls” (MD 64, 2); “the complete conversion of his soul” (MF 103, 1); “prayers and tears for his conversion” (MF 122, 3); “until he was converted” (MF 161, 2); “...the principal conversion is that of the heart” (MF 175, 2); “has no other aim than the conversion of souls” (Devoirs I, 33); “a true conversion of the heart to God” (Devoirs I, 348); “zeal for the conversion of sinners” (Du Culte, 229); “God does not want the death of the sinner, but his conversion” (EM, 69).

2.3. The Dynamic of CONVERSION

In De La Salle’s writings, conversion is governed by two actions: *a*) the break with sin; *b*) communion with God. Let us analyse briefly what De La Salle tells us:

2.3.1. *The position from which one is to be CONVERTED.* In the theological-spiritual world, De La Salle has clearly outlined the terrible position of sin in its many manifestations, dominating the history of humanity. Sin is considered by the Holy Founder as an offence and an outrage against God (cf. Devoirs I, 290; Devoirs II, 9; GA, 376). It is the greatest of evils (cf. GA 375 & 376). It is disobedience to God (cf. PA 454). It is the servitude of man by the powers of interior darkness and makes us “sons of the devil” (Devoirs II, 165), allies of the Evil One, of the wicked and of evil. “World” is often used by De La Salle in the Johannine sense, that is to say, in the global situation of sin, a world contaminated by iniquity and with its own power of corruption.

Several examples can illustrate what we have just presented: “You should have such a horror of sin as to refrain even from what St. Paul says ‘has a look of evil about it’” (MD 39, 1); “If you truly belong to God, you are the world’s enemy and the world is yours, because it is God’s enemy” (MD 41, 2); St. Ambrose gave everything up “in order to be able to lose the spirit of the world completely” (MF 81, 1); “Ask Jesus, through the power and the grace of his wonderful birth, to desire the destruction or the obliteration of all sin in you and every inclination to sin” (MF 94, 2); “Anybody who loves the world and its pleasures cannot receive God’s Spirit” (MD 42, 1; cf. 41, 1; MF 161, 1).

2.3.2. *The Situation to which one is to be converted*

According to De La Salle, it is obvious that it is not enough to break with sin, its intrigues and its consequences, and with the sin-dominated world. The most important thing in conversion is to seek the glory of the Lord and thus attain one’s own salvation, to be a saint. Sanctity demands death to sin: “We cannot become sanctified until sin has been eliminated” (MF 162,1); “You must destroy the man of sin in you, which has domina-

2.5. The Means of Conversion

Apart from giving full and deep attention, in his writings, to the “renunciation of sin” and the ideal to be pursued, viz., “full communion with God”, St. John Baptist De La Salle also presents, in a well-expounded way, the means necessary for conversion and sanctification. In this study, we shall confine ourselves to those areas that appear to be the most important in the Saint’s writings.

2.5.1. *The Grace of God:*

“So great is God’s goodness, that having created men, He desires that all will come to the knowledge of Truth. This Truth is God Himself and everything that He has been so good as to reveal to us” (MR 193, 1). It is God’s wish that all men be saved. However, He cannot really wish this, if He does not give them the necessary means... (MR 193, 3). As a result, God acts through the Holy Spirit in the hearts and wills of those who seek to live according to the dictates of His love. No one can be saved without the help of grace (cf. Devoirs II, 249), cannot do anything (cf. EM 98). The Holy Spirit only comes to a soul to give it the life of grace or to make it act through God’s grace (cf. MD 45, 1). Salvation, happiness, depend on fidelity to grace (cf. MF 96, 1).

2.5.2. *The Example of Jesus Christ* who came into this world to destroy sin and to make it possible for all men to be sanctified and to gain salvation (MD 25, 1 & 2; MD 28, 1 & 2; MD 29, 2 & 3; MF 112, 2). Jesus loves us, gives us His message of love, gives us His life, remains with us in the Eucharist... (cf. MF 84, 2 & 3; MF 88, 2; MF 102, 2). Jesus desires our conversion, our salvation, to make new men of us: “Jesus wishes to enter into our hearts in order to enable us to share in His nature so that we become completely changed into heavenly beings” (MF 85, 3); “By means of what Jesus has done for us, it is possible for us to become saints” (MF 112, 3). For this to happen, we must “lead a life attached to Jesus” (MF 88, 2; MF 167, 2), “show great love for Jesus Christ” (MF 144, 4); “follow Jesus with total dedication” (MF 144, 2; MF 145, 1; MF 167, 1).

2.5.3. *Mary’s Example* – Not having original

sin nor any stain of sin, made holy in her mother’s womb, Mary is, for De La Salle, the perfect model of a human being sanctified by God’s grace, and who, throughout her life, lived in the closest communion with the Lord and His Plan of Salvation. We can both admire and assimilate this in the ten meditations on Mary written by De La Salle (MF 82, 83, 104, 112, 141, 151, 156, 163, 164, 191) and in many others of his writings on her (cf. Culte 254; EM 16, 126; Recueil 131, 198; Devoirs, I & II etc.). De La Salle had a very special devotion to Mary and wanted his followers, his Brothers and pupils, to love her, imitate her and have recourse to her in everything and for everything. We find, in Mary, a powerful support in our quest for holiness, our radical following of Jesus and the closest communion possible with God and His Plan of Salvation.

2.5.4. *The Example of the Saints* – De La Salle wrote a book of Meditations for the Principal Feasts of the Year (CL No. 12, Part II). The majority of these meditations are dedicated to the Saints of the Liturgical Calendar of his time. Apart from a synthesis of several features of the life of the saint, De La Salle highlights aspects of the saint that he wishes to apply to the Brothers, to the ministry that they exercise in the Church, but especially to the spiritual journey of the Brothers in the continual process of conversion and of seeking holiness. The theme, “conversion” is constantly referred to in the life and mission of the Saints. It appears with especial emphasis in the Meditations on St. John the Baptist, the Apostles (cf. St. Matthew, St. Paul); on St. Monica, St. Augustine, St. Anthony of Padua, St. Mary Magdalen, St. Ignatius, St. Dominic, St. Cyprian, St. Yon, St. Denis, St. Peter of Alcantara, St. Hilarion, St. Marcel of Paris, St. Martin of Tours, St. Catherine... To his Brothers, De La Salle presents for their meditation the conversion ministry exercised by many saints and the Brothers, in a somewhat similar way, have to do the same for their pupils: “Pray to God continually for all the pupils, following the example of St. Marcellus, especially for the conversion of those who have evil tendencies” (MF 186, 3); “How strong and effective is example for achieving success in converting souls and helping them to grow in virtue”, writes De La

Salle on St. Hilarion (MF 180, 1). In addition, in the Meditation on St. Dyonisius we come across this exhortation: “Be convinced that the main form of conversion is that of the heart, and that without this conversion, that of the spirit is completely barren” (MF 175, 2). From the Meditation on St. Augustine: “This saint was changed into a new man, a man of God and after his conversion, he prepared himself carefully to work solidly for the conversion of others” (MF 161, 1).

2.5.5. *The Holy Scriptures*

The Word of God in the Holy Scriptures is an exceptionally good means of conversion and sanctification, De La Salle stresses the importance of this in the Meditations on the Biblical texts used on Sundays (CL 12, 1st. Part), and also on the feasts of Mary and the Saints. The Meditation on St. Catherine of Alexandria is a genuine treatise on the importance of the Holy Scriptures for our lives (MF 192): “Having been converted to the faith from her early years, St. Catherine found, in the reading of the Holy Books, a powerful means of preserving her faith. She undertook the study of Holy Scripture so thoroughly that she came to know them perfectly... You must realise how important it is for you to know the Holy Scripture... It strengthens the soul in faith and in the practice of doing good... Read it frequently and may this holy reading fill you so much with the Spirit of God that you will be able to do everything easily... it is very important that you reap the maximum benefit from reading the Holy Scriptures, since God has given you the responsibility to teach, to reprove, to correct and to lead to devotion the children entrusted to your care” (MF 192, 1 & 2). In the Rule of the Institute, the Holy Founder made the Holy Scriptures the first means of acquiring the spirit of faith and zeal, the spirit peculiar to the Institute which he founded. Thus he writes in Chapter II of the Rule: “In order to enter into this spirit and live up to it, the Brothers of this Society shall have a most profound respect for the Holy Scriptures. In proof thereof, they shall always carry the New Testament with them, and pass no day without reading some of it, through a sentiment of faith, respect and veneration for the divine words contained therein, looking upon it as

their first and principal rule” (RC of 1718, Ch.II: “Of the Spirit of this Institute” cf. CL No. 25).

With complete familiarity, De La Salle makes use of the Holy Scriptures in all his writings, a proof of the special love which is nourished by this as the primary source of the Revelation of all that God wishes for his Plan Of Salvation to be carried out. Here, De La Salle finds sustenance for sanctity and the substance of what is to be presented in the apostolate and, in the case of the Brothers, for the Christian education of poor children and youth. In his catechisms and other pedagogical books, De La Salle gives priority to the Holy Scriptures, as the source of catechesis and of educational guidance for the training of the genuine Christian (Devoirs I & II, Grand Abrégé, Petit Abrégé, etc.). The Brother is motivated to be a man of the Bible, with every moment of his life enlightened by the Word of God (cf. Recueil 126; CL 15, 66). But, at the same time he must take care not to alter or water down this Sacred Word (MR 193, 1).

2.5.6. *Prayer in its various forms, especially the Holy Eucharist*

Conversion is the fruit of the Church’s prayer. Saint Monica is put forward by De La Salle as a model of this: “by the power of prayers and tears, she succeeded in converting Augustine to Catholicism” (MF 122, 1). And De La Salle asks the Brothers: “Do you beg God to give the pupils the grace to change their lives?” (MF 122, 2). Prayer is indispensable for overcoming temptation and sin, and for obtaining graces, the practice of virtue, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the effectiveness of the mission: “Devote yourself to the practice of piety, because piety is a treasure and it is all availing” (MF 190, 1); “It is through prayer that the Holy Spirit comes to you and will teach you all the truths of religion...” (MF 191, 2; 42, 3); “As you are under the obligation of obtaining graces not only for yourself but also for others, and also of acquiring the gift of touching hearts, you ought to apply yourself in a special manner to prayer for this is precisely the exercise which God has provided for you, as a channel of His grace. Is this exercise the one that is most dear to you ? Strive to perform all your actions in a spirit of prayer. It

is one of the best ways of sanctifying them” (MF 129, 2); “the more fervently you apply yourself to prayer for the good of the pupils, the more God will help you to touch hearts” (MF 148, 2; 159, 2; 161, 1); “a real transfiguration will only be achieved in recollection and prayer, or rather, a complete transfiguration and God’s enlightenment” (MF 154, 3).

De La Salle offers guidance on the distinct forms of prayer, but he places a special value on Meditation or Mental Prayer, about which he wrote an important treatise (Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer - CL No. 14). But the prayer par excellence is the Holy Eucharist: “It is true that Christ lives in those who receive Him (in the Blessed Sacrament); He takes possession of all the faculties of the soul and carries out life-giving actions, guiding and directing them with His divine Spirit, through whom He remains and works in souls” (MD 48, 1). De La Salle advises frequent communion and opposes excuses given for not receiving. He goes into details over the way to receive communion well in order to obtain the maximum benefit from this Most Holy Sacrament, which must be loved tenderly because it is an outstanding proof of the love of Jesus Christ and is an excellent means of sanctification (cf. MD. 55, 1 & 2; cf. Meditations 47 to 55; 141; 144; 147; 130 and 26, 3).

2.5.7. *Fasting, penance, mortification, suffering*

According to De La Salle, these are essential as a constant state of mind to live in a state of conversion, of seeking for holiness. In Meditation No. 4, it is suggested that John the Baptist preached repentance and penance as a condition for conversion. In order to attain holiness, it is necessary, as he writes in Med. 16, 2, to deprive the eyes, the tongue and the heart, and for a holy death, a penitential life is required. Without the cross, it is impossible to be a disciple of Christ; the cross has to be borne each day to follow Him to the top of Calvary (cf. MF 121; MD 162, 3; MD 145, 1). One of the teachings that occurs very often in Lasallian doctrine is the love of suffering, up to the point of actually seeking out suffering. The greatest miracle of grace is to love sufferings and insults so that we will only reach heaven by following the way of

tribulations, as De La Salle teaches in Meditation 149, 3. The reward for working for the poor, for working for the Kingdom, is injuries, outrages, calumnies, prosecutions and death (cf. MF 120, 3; L53, 3; 162, 3; 166, 3; 168, 3; 175, 3; 177; 182, 2). Prayer and mortification are necessary to draw down God’s grace on the pupils (cf. MF 153, 1). A Christian, and much more so a religious, cannot live without mortification (cf. MF 190, 2) which must be considered as a duty (cf. MF 190, 2).

2.5.8. *Cultivation of All the Virtues*

This is necessary for holiness, hope and charity. “The spirit of this Institute is the spirit of faith” (RC, 1718, Ch. 2; MF 147, 3; MF 139, 2 & 3; MF 117, 3; MD 32, 2 & 3; MD 46, 2; MF 80, 3; MF 84, 3; MF 87, 3; MF 96, 2; MF 117, 1 & 3) and is the spirit of zeal (RC, 1718, CH. 2; MD 2, 2; MF 78, 2 & 3; MF 79, 3; MF 80, 3; MF 81, 2; MD 87, 1; MF 93, 3; MF 114, 2). “In your work you especially need zeal for the salvation of souls” (MF 119, 3). Charity is love of God (dedicating oneself completely to Him, with all one’s love) (cf. MD 70; MF 90; MF 94, 1 & 3; MF 104, 3; MF 88, 2; MD 58, 3; MD 34, 3; MF 146, 3). However, charity is equally love of one’s neighbour, especially of the most needy. “In your work you are obliged to love the poor since your function is to teach them” (MF 174, 1); “have a tender love for the poor, like St. Cyprian who followed Jesus’ example in this” (MF 156, 2; cf. also MF 154, 1; MF 133, 2 & 3; MF 101, 3; MF 86). When De La Salle is speaking about the Community life of his Brothers, he gives important guide lines on this Queen of the virtues, which is vital for sanctification (cf. Meditations 72 to 77).

The quest for sanctity, a requirement for conversion, is implied in the cultivation of other virtues, which De La Salle considers as important, as for example, poverty (cf. MF 81, 1; MF 86; MF 142, 2; MF 143, 2; MF 166, 1 & 2; MF 176; MF 179, 1; MF 187, 1). A further example is chastity, purity (cf. Devoirs 1, 392, 394, 414; RC 44, 1; MF 80, 1; MF 158, 1; EM 94; GA, 385). For De La Salle, Obedience is also a virtue of great importance for holiness (MD. 7 to 15; RC CH. 20; Recueil 45 to 158). In the eschatological dimension, a

fundamental fact of the Christian faith, De La Salle regards the Fear of God as a basic aid to conversion and sanctification; it is a gift and a virtue which prepares us to come before the Supreme Judge in a saintly way (MR 208; cf. MF 90 to 92).

2.6. The State of Life of a Converted Person

The description of a convert, somebody who has effectively renounced sin, given up the world to attach himself completely to God and who has set out on the road to holiness, makes its appearance, meticulously detailed, throughout the writings of De La Salle. It seems that he omits nothing in describing this ideal of living for God and his Plan of Salvation. De La Salle simply demands perfection.

As De La Salle was writing especially for his Brothers of the Christian Schools, he lays stress constantly on death to sin, to the world, to creatures, to things, to the manners and pleasures of this world (cf. MD 76, 2; MF 98, 2; 99, 1; 136, 1; 137, 1; 143, 1; 144, 1; 157, 3; 158, 2; 161, 1; 174, 2; 182, 1; 183, 3; 189, 2; cf. 191, 1; 187, 2; 169, 2). De La Salle urges Consecration to God, to total and unique attachment to Him (cf. MF 83, 3; 146, 3; 169, 1; cf. MD 35, 1; 42, 1; 58, 3; 59, 1; 173, 1). What ought to be desired is the "new life" in the Risen Christ, to be part of the new creation (cf. MD 29, 2 & 3; 30, 1; 31, 1; 32, 1; 43, 1; MF 92, 3) until it is Christ who lives in the person (cf. MD 22, 2; 48, 1; 49, 3).

The road to holiness, which is entered upon by conversion, is very difficult, very narrow, paved with persecution, misunderstanding and mortifica-

tion, and leads to "dark nights", dryness and the absence of God. We can do nothing on our own. We must give ourselves up to the action of grace, to the Holy Spirit, and be faithful to God, seeking the strength to continue along the road to holiness in retreat, in prayer, in the frequent use of the Sacraments and the Holy Scriptures, in devotion to Mary and in apostolic zeal. For the Brother of the Christian Schools there is a very special way of leading a life of charity as a privileged road to holiness: community life, in fraternity with one's colleagues and in loving dedication to the Christian education of poor children.

The person who lives in a permanent state of conversion "aims only to live and behave for the glory of God alone" (cf. MF 89, 3), "his happiness in this world consists of attaching himself to God alone" (MF 89, 2) and in loving God alone (cf. MF 89, 1; MD 70). Moreover, De La Salle comes to the conclusion that anybody who leads his life sincerely searching for the holy will of God in all things (cf. MD 21, 1 & 3; MD 42, 2; MD 67, 1) and devoting himself to the apostolate, will have nothing to fear at the last day and will rejoice in the reward which God has prepared with much tenderness (cf. MF 90; MR 208).

¹ BROWN, Colin, *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology*, 1978. Trad. Portuguesa. Vol I verbete "Conversao" pages 4596-504 (Ed. Vida Nova BH).

² San Agustín, *De Libero Arbitrio* I, 6; PL 32,1 340; PL II, 19.

³ FERNANDEZ Domiciano, *Conversión in Diccionario Teológico de la Vida Consagrada*. Publ. Claretianas 1989, Madrid, pages 459-467.

⁴ *Ibidem*, page 460.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. «Conversao, Penitencia, Arrependimento, Prosélito» in *Diccionario Internacional de Teologia do Novo Testamento*, Colin Brown, Trd. Port. da Sociedad Religiosa, Ed. Vida Nova, BH, Brasil.
2. «Pénitence-conversion» in Léon-Dufour Xavier - *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique* - Les Ed. du Cerf, Paris, 1964.
3. «Conversión» in *Diccionario de Teologia Biblica*; Bauer, J.B. Barcelona 1967.
4. «Conversión» in *Diccionario Teológico de la Vida consagrada*, Publ. Claretianas, Madrid 1989.
5. P. Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality*; Vol. IV, part II: *from Jansenism to Modern Times*, Westminster, Neuman Press, 1955, pp. 313-319. (S. John Baptist de La Salle).
6. De La Salle, J. B.: (See Cahiers Lasalliens Nos. 2, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 25 for Les Oeuvres complètes de S.J.B. de La Salle).
7. «Conversion» in *Vocabulaire Lasallien*, Paris, Rue de Sèvres, 78A, Paris, 1976.

Bro. Israel José NERY
Translated from Spanish by Bro. Philip SMITH

