

96. SUFFERING

(to suffer and derivatives)

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1. THE CONTEXT

The Trévoux *Dictionnaire universel* (1721) defines suffering as “pain of mind or body, or the state of a person who endures suffering”. A second meaning relevant to the purpose of this article is “the action of suffering, or being in pain”. An example of this given in the same dictionary is: “A religious ought to seek spiritual progress in the suffering of injuries”.

He defines the verb “to suffer” as “enduring pain, evil or some serious ailment”.

The *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (article by Pierre Sempé, 1990) speaks of Jesus alleviating all kinds of suffering by his power of healing. He does not teach that suffering is a divine punishment for sin (Lk 13,4).

He gives an example of patience in suffering and prepares himself for suffering on behalf of his people and ultimately his own glory.

The same dictionary points out that, in his writings, Paul associates the suffering of Jesus with Old Testament sacrifices, but adds that these have been replaced by the sacrifice of Jesus. Human suffering is valuable when it is associated with that of Christ for the edification of the Church (Col 1,24) in the hope of the resurrection (Phil 3,10).

Typical also of Christian spirituality is Saint Vincent de Paul's view that, while suffering can become sanctifying, we must work to alleviate the suffering of others after the example and teaching of Christ.

2. DE LA SALLE'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS SUFFERING

Even as a child De La Salle seemed to have a special sensitivity to the suffering of others and a desire to alleviate it. Over a period of several years, from the age of 28 to 33, he became progressively more dedicated to the work of establishing the *Christian Schools* for poor children, so that he gave up completely a life of comparative wealth and comfort to embrace a life of suffering poverty with all the pain of hunger and sickness that this entailed.

Wishing to be "a disciple and imitator of Jesus Christ" (CL 20, preface = DA 0,0,5), he bore in mind that "it is the love of suffering and mortification that renders us like him" (MF 176,3).

He was motivated by the kenosis of the Son of God in the mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption. De La Salle practiced mortification and self-denial to a heroic degree.

In addition to bodily suffering, De La Salle also practiced a heroic degree of humility in his acceptance of the shortcomings of the Brothers with whom he worked, and the hostility of all sorts of people, not excluding Church authorities from whom he should have received support. (Cf. Blain's *Life of De La Salle*, CL 8, 391-401 on his poverty, 402-423 on his humility, 451-465 on his penitence and mortification, 466-481 on his patience and kindness).

Various modern historians have been struck by the opposition encountered in France by any attempt to make the common people literate, and by the moral sufferings the saintly educator had to undergo as a consequence. This observation is important because, as we shall see next, it reinforces the theological teachings of the author of the *Duties* by this reference to everyday experience.

3. DE LA SALLE'S TEACHING ON SUFFERING

A good summary of De La Salle's idea of suffering can be found in his extensive treatise on the Christian life, *Les Devoirs d'un Chretien envers Dieu* (DA), and its question-and-answer companion volumes (DB, DC). These texts gave De La Salle an opportunity to state his theology more systematically than in any of his other writings. They can be considered, therefore, as a framework for understanding what suffering meant to him.

3.1 Attitude of Jesus Christ to suffering

In general, it can be said that for De La Salle suffering has no significance apart from Jesus Christ, and in Christ all suffering can have a positive value.

The purpose of the coming of Jesus Christ into this world was to experience suffering and death to atone "for the sins of all people" (CL 20,46 = DA 104,7,1; cf. MF 152,1). Jesus passed his whole life in suffering (CL 20,46 & 20,86 = DA 104,7,1 & 106,0,12; cf. MF 165,3; MF 89,2; CL 17,216 = I 3,39,1).

This emphasis on the suffering of Jesus reflects the doctrine of annihilation of the Word (*anéantissement du Verbe*) in the French School of Spirituality. Accordingly, suffering was undertaken out of love:

"The eternal Father wished to deliver his only Son to death on the cross [...] to give a proof of his excessive love, and to give us, in the person of his Son, a great example of humility and patience, and to stimulate us to love him with all the affection of our heart, and to suffer willingly all the sufferings he will choose to send us" (CL 20,56 = DA 104,9,5).

The "treasure of the Church", which is completely spiritual, is made up of "the superabundant satisfaction of Our Lord", who "suffered much more than was called for by the justice of God" (CL 20,342f = DA 307,8,8f). In imitation of Christ, the saints accepted suffering with joy, and their merits are applied to the penitent faithful (CL 22,112 = DC 30,12,6).

3.2 Suffering and sin

The suffering of Jesus expiates sin (CL 20,346 = DA 307,8,18; cf. CL 14,26 & 14,67f = EM 2,83 & 8,195f); it satisfies God's justice for the offense of sin against God (CL 21,46 = DB 1,10,7; cf. CL 17,216 = I 3,39,2).

Only Jesus could satisfy for sin because he was God and could balance the offense against God by the suffering of God; but the Son of God had to become human, because God himself cannot experience suf-

fering (CL 21,46f = DB 1,10,7f). De La Salle writes : “The offense that our sins gave God being infinite, it was necessary that the satisfaction required for them should also be infinite, and this could not be given by any created being”. He adds, however, that it was not necessary for the Man-God to undergo great suffering and death to obtain this satisfaction. Hence “why did Jesus Christ suffer so much ?” De La Salle replies : “It was to show us the great love he had for us, and to make us have a greater horror for sin” (CL 21,46f = DB 1,10,7).

3.3. Attitude of the believer

The Christian, a sinner and redeemed at the same time, is associated with the redemptive work of his Saviour. De La Salle shows the role that accepted suffering can play in it. “Question : In how many ways can we give satisfaction to God ? Answer : We can do so in seven ways : 1. By the penance the confessor gives us. 2. By the penances we undertake voluntarily. 3. By the afflictions that God sends us, such as illnesses, etc...” (CL 21,198 = DB 3,14,3).

The Christian honours the risen Christ by bearing with suffering “with patience, tranquillity and joy [...] in the hope of eternal happiness” (CL 22,96 = DC 30,8,9). Suffering in order to expiate sin is partly the theme of the “Profession of a Penitent” which De La Salle borrowed from Jean Jacques Olier (CL 15,87f = R 15,7). See *Lasallian Themes 2*, the article *Penitent* by Gilles Beaudet.

The superabundance of Jesus’ suffering is also the source of all the graces needed by the faithful to know and love God (CL 20,194 = DA 300,0,2), and to have confidence in God’s mercy (CL 20,364 = DA 308,2,14) and in the efficacy of prayer (CL 20,460 = DA 404,1,6).

The Christian is called to share in the sufferings of Christ (CL 20,223; 20,227; 20,239 = DA 302,3,3; 302,3,11; 302,2,7). Patience can procure for him peace even in suffering (CL 20,227 = DA 302,3,11). Suffering can be a form of prayer (CL 20,473 = DA 405,1,12), an act of love of God (CL 20,186; 20,233; 21,136; 22,194 = DA 216,1,5; DA 303,1,4; DB 2,17,5; DC 42,13,17), of love of neighbour (CL 20,342f = DA 307,8,90f), or of the souls in purgatory (CL 20,350 = DA 307,9,2).

3.4. Attitude of the teaching Brother

In the meditations, De La Salle wrote for the Brothers he exhorts them have a love for suffering (MF 78,3; 95,3; 102,3; 118,2; 124,2; 145,1-3; 149,3; 152,3; 173,3; 177,2; 183,1).

In some of the community prayers of the Brothers there are other examples of De La Salle’s attitude towards suffering. The *Aspirations to Jesus Suffering* were recited twice daily, and significantly to prepare the Brothers mentally for the recreation periods that were to follow (CL 25, art. 99 above; cf. RC 30,20,6). Borrowed from Jean de Bernières, this litany concludes with the request that Jesus “imprint deeply in our hearts an esteem and love for [his sufferings] and make us desire to practice them”.

3.5. Insistence on love and union with God in suffering

Love is at the root of the attitude of acceptance of suffering, both in the life of Jesus and in that of the Christian. De La Salle teaches this in his catechisms. In the meditations he wrote for the Brothers, he says it with even greater insistence.

Jesus had a desire and a love for suffering, based on his love for the Father’s will and his love for his people. This is the theme for the meditation for Wednesday in Holy Week, which would need to be quoted in full. The same applies to the meditations for Good Friday and Holy Saturday (MD 25, 27 & 28).

Christians pay honor to the Risen Lord by accepting suffering with patience, tranquillity and joy (CL 22,96 & 284 = DC 30,8,9 & 44,20,7).

The saints, too, had a love for suffering in the sight of God (MF 79,1; 102,3; 109,2; 130,3; 140,3; 142,2; 149,3; 154,2; 176,3). In the meditation on Saint Francis of Assisi the motivation for this is stated clearly : “When he considered what Jesus had endured for his sake, he resolved, after leaving the world, never to allow a single moment of his life to pass without some mortification. Jesus Christ in agony, that divine model of all who choose voluntary suffering for God’s sake, became the special delight of his heart” (MF 173,3).

Similarly, in his meditation on Saint Catherine of Alexandria De La Salle says that when persons are

prepared “by seclusion, prayer, and the reading of Scripture (as she was), [...] it frequently happens that they are undisturbed by suffering because they receive suffering as coming from God and as a means to be closely united to him and to possess him” (MF 192,3).

In his meditation on the feast of All Saints De La Salle uses the epistle to the Hebrews to speak of the suffering that the saints endured, saying that they were

animated by the hope of eternal joy and by the example of Jesus (MF 183,2).

One way for Christians to celebrate the feast of Christmas is “to thank God for having given us his own Son”, and then “to ask God for the grace to love suffering and especially to suffer cold and poverty willingly for the love of God” (CL 22,142 = DC 42,2,7).

Nothing in De La Salle's teaching seems more countercultural than his doctrine about suffering. We are living in an age of self-indulgence in which any willingness to suffer patiently is often regarded as psychologically unbalanced. Medical science has almost alleviated pain for those who can afford its care. Though philosophers have taught the inevitability and positive effects of suffering that can be borne patiently, only a deep faith can assist the ordinary person to recognize any value in suffering. Jesus taught us that suffering is not a part of God's plan to punish sin (Jn 9,3), though he permits it as a consequence of our finite world and our imperfect human nature; what God wills is patience, gentleness, and compassion in the imitation of his Son, Jesus.

Complementary Themes

Abandonment

Consolation-Tipidity-Dryness

Humility

Mortification

Penitent

Renunciation

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Br Augustine Robert LOES