

# 14. COUNSELS

## Summary:

1. Definition. – 2. Christians who do not accept the Counsels. – 3. The “Counsels” of the religious life and the beatitudes. – 4. Conclusion.

## 1. DEFINITION

When La Salle wrote about the Gospel counsels in his *Devoirs d'un Chrétien*,<sup>1</sup> he did not do so from the viewpoint of the three vows of the religious life, but rather as an element of the entire Gospel, or even of the New Testament as a whole.

He actually presented an interesting classification of the counsels: “The principal counsels can be divided into three groups: one called ‘the works of mercy’, another called the “eight beatitudes”, and another group made up of the maxims taught by Jesus Christ himself or by His Apostles, maxims to be practiced by those who desire to follow Him faithfully”.<sup>2</sup>

A “counsel” is any one of several specific calls in the New Testament to live the Christian life according to the teaching of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> It is an invitation to teach the ignorant those things they are obliged to know [in order to be saved],<sup>4</sup> to correct those who fall into a fault, to give wise advice, to console the sorrowful, to endure insult with patience, to be forgiving, to pray for the living and the dead; it is also to give food and drink to those in need, shelter to the homeless, clothing to the naked; also to help the poor generously and with love, to visit the sick and those in prison, to ransom captives [or free hostages],<sup>5</sup> and to bury the dead. All of these are projects of social action and Christian pastoral care which, under new names, are not at all irrelevant to our contemporary needs.

How does La Salle conceive of the Beatitudes? “They are the practices of very excellent virtues that lead persons to the holiness and perfection of the Christian life. Jesus promised that those who practice them will have happiness in this life and a promise of the complete happiness that is enjoyed in heaven”.<sup>6</sup>

La Salle makes ready reference to the Beatitudes. In his book on the Mass, one of the first books that he gives to the students,<sup>7</sup> the Gospel of the Beatitudes as given in Luke (6:20-35) is the one he uses. He takes pains to explain the meaning of the Gospel expressions. Often he refers to the Beatitude of those “persecuted for the sake of justice”: “Nothing gives a greater assurance of eternal happiness than the persecution that a person suffers for the sake of God”<sup>8</sup> (See also **Persecution**).

A Counsel is also a Christian maxim. “Many are easily found throughout the New Testament”. They are given by both Jesus and his Apostles. They are a pathway to Christian perfection: “It is a responsibility of Christians to read and meditate on them often, to take the means to practice them and by this means to become perfect Christians”.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. CHRISTIANS WHO DO NOT ACCEPT THE COUNSELS

Though the counsels, of which the beatitudes are one form, are the means of living a Christian

life to its perfection, it does not follow that Christians are readily disposed to practice them. La Salle does not fail to chastize the “bad Christian” whose influence is so evil: “bad Christians among us are more dangerous than the tyrants who persecuted the Christians in the past; these tyrants did not always bother to take all kinds of ways to deny Jesus Christ, which is what bad Christians do. These tyrants denied Jesus Christ by word and with a certain restraint, whereas bad Christians deny Jesus Christ by their actions and with full liberty”.<sup>10</sup> This is the same kind of complaint that La Salle expresses in one of the meditations:

It is all too common to see in Christians (even in communities that follow a Rule) little enthusiasm for these practical truths; they contradict these truths in their hearts and sometimes even in their exterior conduct as, for example, when someone tells them... to pray without ceasing, to enter heaven by the narrow gate, or that Jesus Christ has said: if you do not do penance you will all perish, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ... How many are there among these bad Christians who have convinced themselves that all these truths are only counsels of perfection?<sup>11</sup> (See also: **Spirit of Christianity**).

La Salle states clearly that Jesus preached these counsels “as practices that are necessary for salvation”. These maxims are very demanding; only the Spirit of God can give the understanding and the strength to effectively put them into practice. “Unless the Spirit of God himself teaches us, how could we know that the poor are blessed, that we must love those who hate us, that we must be glad when others speak ill of us and say all sorts of evil against us, that we must render good for evil, and how could we know, unless the Spirit of God teaches us, a great number of other truths that are clean contrary to what our human nature suggests?”<sup>12</sup>

La Salle adds: “Most people understand none of this because they love darkness more than the light, and they know neither the Spirit of God, nor what God is able to inspire and effect [in us]”.<sup>13</sup> “The world has its own maxims that are altogether contrary to those that the Spirit of God teaches souls...”<sup>14</sup>

### 3. THE “COUNSELS” OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE AND BEATITUDES

\* Poverty (See also under **Poverty**), the first beatitude is often mentioned in the writings of La Salle: “It is not enough to be deprived of the goods and conveniences of life, unless it is voluntary and with love; this is why Jesus Christ did not say only “Blessed are the poor”, but “the poor in spirit”; this spirit of poverty is often as rare in [religious] communities as it is in the world”.<sup>15</sup>

\* Obedience (See also under **Obedience**) is rarely mentioned by La Salle as an evangelical counsel; rather it is the obligatory virtue in a [religious] community; it is also the foundation of all the other virtues. But in his writings that are known to us it is not specifically justified as one of the primary counsels as such in an explicit way. Nevertheless, obedience was a vow in the community founded by La Salle.

\* Chastity (See also under **Chastity**), or purity (See also under **Purity**), is the favorite virtue of Jesus Christ;<sup>16</sup> it is required in the Rule as being an essential Christian virtue, but La Salle does not present it as a counsel that constitutes the religious life. Nevertheless, if he is not explicit about this, it is clear that he would not fail to recognize these virtues as counsels in accord with the teaching of the Council of Trent, to which he was so faithful.<sup>17</sup> It seems that it was primarily in the proclamation of the beatitudes that La Salle placed the full value of these Christians virtues of poverty and chastity.

### 4. CONCLUSION

The central thought of La Salle regarding the counsels, the beatitudes, and the maxims of the Gospel is less an obsession with perfection and salvation, and more a fidelity to the teaching of Jesus, but it is a fidelity without any false escape from reality, and rather a total commitment to the will of Jesus in order to attain the level that He expects of his true disciples (See also under **Disciple**).

<sup>1</sup> The text followed is CL 20. In the catechism (CL 21) La Salle treats of the virtues, but does not give a section or a chapter on the counsels, nor on the beatitudes. However, Joly (who is largely the source for CL 21) has seven questions on the counsels and a dozen on the beatitudes with a brief explanation of each. It seems that La Salle borrowed some ideas from the catechism of Joly in order to comment on the third, sixth and seventh beatitudes. But it is more Le Coreur who has given La Salle ideas for his presentation on the counsels, the beatitudes, and the maxims.

<sup>2</sup> La Salle differs clearly from Joly and Le Coreur in this classification. They do not make such a grouping, but separate the counsels from the beatitudes, and Joly emphasizes in particular that the counsels are "offered to persons who leave the world to lead a more holy life". It is important to note that for La Salle all the counsels are intended for the observance of all the people of God without exception.

<sup>3</sup> The listing presented here of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy follow the thought of La Salle; he himself follows almost to the letter Le Coreur's *La Théologie du Chrétien* (p. 204). The language used in this article is somewhat modernized: to "shelter the homeless", instead of "welcome travelers and strangers who arrive without lodging" (CL 20, p. 189).

<sup>4</sup> It seems that these words are implicit in the thought of La Salle and they have been added for the sake of clarity. This is justified for two reasons: *a*) La Salle speaks of counsels as necessary for salvation (CL 12 MD, p. 21); *b*) the context of "the truths that must be known" recalls the ten articles of faith that must be taught "in order to be able to merit and obtain eternal salvation" (CL 18, p. 52, CL 23, p. 431, CL 17, p. 78). The Brother of the Christian Schools practices this counsel by his vocation. La Salle does not emphasize the three counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. When he makes allusion to the religious life it is rather in the context of a vow as such in its quality of a theological act of the consecration of oneself to God (CL 20, p. 117-118).

<sup>5</sup> To express the reality in today's terms.

<sup>6</sup> Once again La Salle is closer to Le Coreur than to Joly when he treats of the counsels, beatitudes, and maxims of the Gospel.

<sup>7</sup> A work bearing the approval of 1698 and printed before 1702 by Langlois.

<sup>8</sup> MF 167.3; 168.3.

<sup>9</sup> CL 20, p. 192. Would it be an exaggeration to think that La Salle's idea of the counsels includes a bit of what is found today in studies that try to synthesize the "morality of the New Testament"?

<sup>10</sup> CL 20, p. 233.

<sup>11</sup> CL 12, MD, p. 21; MF, p. 219. This is how Joly defines counsels: "certain excellent actions that Our Lord Jesus Christ proposes to us which are not of obligation" (*Devoirs du chrétien*, p. 176). Le Coreur makes the same distinction as Joly: "The commandments oblige all Christians, the counsels oblige only those who are called to observe them" (*Théologie du Chrétien*, p. 214). For La Salle all Christians are called to observe the counsels in their triple form.

<sup>12</sup> CL 12, MD, pp. 131-132.

<sup>13</sup> *Ib.* p. 132.

<sup>14</sup> *Ib.*

<sup>15</sup> CL 12, MF, p. 154. This clarifies another statement by La Salle concerning the poor of his time, "As they are born poor, it is necessary to encourage them to despise riches and to love poverty" (MTR p. 50). For the rich also, if they are Christians, must learn to love the poverty of spirit proclaimed by Jesus. Brother Michel Sauvage has shown that the evangelical inspiration of La Salle led him to break the social barriers and prepare the way for an emancipation of [poor] people. His own personal option for the poor, his effective action, and his fight to help them rise [out of their poverty] to a minimum [level] of [social] culture give a balance to the restrictive nature of his statement that "as they are born poor, it is necessary to encourage them to ... love poverty" (Sauvage CAMPOS, *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor*, pp. 125-126).

<sup>16</sup> CL MF p. 239.

<sup>17</sup> Brother Maurice-Auguste Hermans writes that La Salle "takes as his own the prescriptions of the Council of Trent, or Clement VIII, for the reform of religious" (CL 11, p. 71). When La Salle makes an allusion to the vows of religion, he considers them as better than the vow to make a pilgrimage. He adds, "It is a thing very agreeable to God ... to bind oneself in this way by a holy obligation to do something good" (CL 20, p. 118).

### Complementary Themes:

Good manners and politeness; Commandments; Christian; Disciple; Holy Spirit; Maxims; Persecutions; Vows.

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