

**DE LA SALLE'S BOOK:
"DUTIES OF A CHRISTIAN".
THE MESSAGE IN ITS TITLE**

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The title of the book "Duties of a Christian" contains a message. We all know that names of people have always had significance. Take for example Abraham, meaning father of believers; Jesus denoting Saviour. From the title of a book also you can have a fair idea of its meaning.

In De La Salle's day, books had long titles summarising their sources, their intended readers, their content, their author, etc.

Let me give some examples:

"New catechism, composed for the youth of the Besancon diocese; a book divided into four parts: what to believe, things to be done, benefits to be received and blessings to be asked for, as ordered by Mgr Anthony Peter de Grammont. Besancon, 1687".

"Dogmatic and moral Instructions necessary for receiving Holy Communion profitably. A useful treatise, not only for young persons, but also for older people who have already received Communion. Paris, 1690".

The next sample is rather interesting, since it is one of the sources of the first part of De La Salle's book "Duties of a Christian"; the catechism of Claude Joly:

"The Duties of the Christian, composed in the form of a catechism, by the Most Illustrious and most Reverend Claude Joly, Bishop and Count of Agen; for the use of priests and faithful of the Diocese. Paris, 1677".

I shall now turn to de La Salle's own book, and, as for the above, give the complete title and attempt, as indicated in the heading of my article, to decipher its message. So let me comment on each element of the title:

"The Duties of a Christian towards God and the means of accomplishing them; a work in two parts".

The first words are "The Duties". Let me begin by mentioning what Paul Hazard tells us in his work on European thought in the XVII Century. He says that people at that time had a strong sense of hierarchy, of discipline, of the orderliness which the authorities had to ensure, and of the dogmas that regulated the way one thought. Hazard calls it the century of Duty, as opposed to the XVIII Century, which was called the Century of Rights.

In fact there were quite a lot of catechetical works with "Duties" as their title. Here are a few:

"A summary of the principal duties of a Christian: printed by order of the Right Rev. Bishop of Lectoure"

"The duties of confession, divided into four parts. Paris".

"The principal duties of the Christian; for the use of missionaries. Paris, 1669".

"The duties of the Christian" by Claude Joly.

"The duties of the Christian" of Le Coreur.

As this article is going to be short, I shall not have space to examine the concept "duties" in each treatise of De La Salle's day. However I can state that it fits in with Paul Hazard's idea: that duty means "an obligation" coming from outside: something which is "imposed".

The comparison of De La Salle's work with its direct ancestors, those of Joly and Le Coreur, helps us to realise the quality of the concept "duties" in the catechetical treatises published in Rheims.

Look first at Claude Joly.

"How many duties does a Christian have?"

"He has five: to know, to do, to avoid, to receive, to ask".

"What is a Christian required to believe?"

Then the same question is asked in the case of the other four obligations.

Next we shall take a glance at Le Coreur.

"Basing himself on the doctrine of Jesus Christ, what are the duties which a Christian is required to perform?"

"He is obliged to believe in the mysteries of the faith; to hope for eternal life, and to obey the commandments of God".

We now come to De La Salle.

"How many duties does a Christian have towards God?"

"He has two".

"Which are they?"

"To know and love God".

"Can a Christian avoid these duties?"

"No, he can never avoid them, if he wishes to live like a true Christian and be pleasing to God".

Summarising the two sources of De La Salle's work, I can mention that they indicate several different objectives of duty: that they never give as basis for duty more than the following three items: doctrine, eternal life, commandments; and finally that both sources, Joly and Le Coreur, emphasise the term "obligation".

On the other hand, De La Salle's own work summarises the duties of a Christian under just two headings: to know and to love God; hence for De La Salle the objective of duty is God. Finally one's duties to God come from one's very nature, the nature of man himself. God is for the Christian the source of his faith and love; duty is based on the freedom of children, not on the servitude of slaves. Therefore the Christian can never avoid performing his duties, which come from two elements in his nature, that of creature and that of baptised person.

I must now present a few thoughts on the next part of the title, which is "of a Christian". It is interesting to note that De La Salle introduces something new with the indefinite

article "a" instead of the definite article "the". Many catechisms of the time to which I have referred talk of "the" Christian. In "Duties of a Christian" on the other hand, we have something specific, in the singular, personified: De La Salle writes to educate "a" Christian. Here the indefinite article "a" has the force of a demonstrative: "this person specifically".

The teaching methodology of De La Salle is personalised. He knew that each family was different, that each student had his own characteristics, his way of acting and his social behaviour. All these items were entered into the student's record and referred to frequently. This personal touch is ever present in "Duties of a Christian". The reader often has the impression that he is being addressed personally.

The next part of the title I would like to comment on is "towards God". There is a noteworthy distinction between De La Salle's attitude and that of his predecessors Joly and Le Coreur, for he establishes a close link between the Christian and God Himself: it is not a link with dogma, commandments, etc. Right from the start De La Salle states that everything that a Christian must believe can be summarised in knowing God in Himself and those things that Jesus Christ accomplished to save humankind. (pp 1-2)

At each stage "Duties of a Christian" emphasises the relationship of God with the Christian; every page seems to highlight the personal, which is skilfully brought out by the style adopted: that of continuous text. We can see the difference by comparing de La Salle with his two sources:

Claude Joly:

*"The Duties of the Christian, part one.
What a Christian is required to believe".*

Le Coreur:

*"The Duties of the Christian, part one.
Concerning the faith as outlined in the Apostles' Creed".*

De La Salle:

"The Duties of a Christian towards God, which are to know Him and love Him. The first part deals with the first duty of a Christian, which is to know God".

The reader can see that, whereas the content of Joly's and Le Coreur's books is stated impersonally, De La Salle refers to a Christian's relationship as with his Father God; not to dogma and moral, but to a Person

When we come to "the means of accomplishing them", De La Salle states that these are sanctifying grace and actual grace, which is again a different standpoint from his predecessors.

Grace is related to the sacraments, not to sin and the commandments as in many catechisms of the time. For example, Joly deals with grace after sin and as a remedy for it, as you can see from this extract:

- *"What is it that wipes away mortal sin from our souls?"*

- "The grace of God, given us by the Holy Spirit".
- "What is grace?"
- "It is a gift of God given to men through pure goodness to bring about their salvation".

Le Coreur includes the section on grace at the beginning of the second part of his book, where he also deals with Hope and the Prayer of Our Lord. In the section on the Sacraments he alludes only briefly to the grace particular to each of them and writes:

- "Why has Jesus Christ instituted several Sacraments?"
- "In order to give us the different graces we need".

De La Salle bases grace and its necessity on the fulfilling of one's duties towards God; all the rest will be received by the Christian as a bonus:

"The most important thing we receive from prayer is to know and love God, for it is only for this that he is in the world and for this reason he has been created to the image of God" (Duties of a Christian, part one).

To possess grace is according to De La Salle to possess God Himself and is a foretaste of life in Heaven: "Grace is the thing we should love most on earth, because when we possess it, we have God Himself, and we enjoy at this very time His holy love".

Brother Jean Pungier confirms the value of grace in De La Salle's doctrine: "When part two, restating what part one had affirmed, talks about "the means", it is not referring primarily to what is useful to man to obtain grace, but to God, who in His wisdom and goodness, fits his gifts and grace to the needs of human nature..."

Before I conclude these small reflections on the title of "Duties of a Christian, part one", I should like to draw the reader's attention to a particular word, which seems to be important: "good or well". In the Prologue to his book, a definition of the Christian is given, but it carries on, with a clarification: "all that has been mentioned before is insufficient to make one a good Christian: authenticity is what counts".

Expressions containing "good Christian", "authentic Christian" often appear in the volume. De La Salle loves actions well performed, the class which is well conducted, students who know Gospel teaching and school subjects thoroughly. Christians who live authentically. If De La Salle encourages such perfection in less important matters, how much more does he encourage it in such essentials as knowing and loving God, which are the objectives of the first part of "Duties of a Christian".

I hope that the reader is now in a position to judge for himself whether or not the title of "Duties of a Christian" contains a rich message worth consideration. ●