

DE LA SALLE
MEDITATIONS FOR FEASTS

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Of all the Cahiers so far published, I find N° 47 - Contribution a l'étude des sources de Meditations sur les principales festes de l'année - one of the most interesting and, dare I say it, useful? (Some of the Cahiers, especially those in the numbers 40 on, seem to me to be almost an exercise in self-indulgence...)

I find this N° 47 very acceptable for one reason especially: in confining itself to the Meditations for Feasts this number implicitly draws attention to the fact that *there are other writings of our Founder - besides the Meditations for Time of Retreat - which merit our attention and our affection.* (I have often felt in recent years that our Lasallian *periti* have been attempting to establish "a canon within the canon": giving the impression that there alone is to be found the authentic thought of De La Salle or, at least, that which alone is really valid for today. (I am reminded of the attitude of Lutheran exegetes towards what they call "der echte Paulus", as though the N T is to be reduced to the Pauline Epistles and the Pauline corpus itself to "the four great Epistles" - Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians ...)

It is not my intention to try here to survey this Volume 47; I wish simply to signalise a few points: namely that these Meditations show the quality of our Founder's doctrine and the depth of his devotion. I shall here attempt to substantiate these claims by more particular reference to the Meditations devoted to *Marian feasts.*

Meditations for Marian Feasts

It is significant that, whereas so many of the Meditations which recall the inspiration afforded us by the saints are in varying degree highly derivative (Cahier N° 47 has gone to the trouble of identifying the sources), in the case of the Meditations for the Marian Feasts they are all almost completely original, being based almost exclusively on the scriptural evidence or, if on any more immediate source, on the Breviary readings ...

The Marian Feasts treated in these Meditations are:

- 2 February - Purification, n° 104
- 25 March - Annunciation, 112
- 2 July (now 31 May) - Visitation, 141
- 5 August - "Our Lady of the Snows", 151 ***
- 15 August - Assumption, 156
- 8 September - Nativity of Blessed Virgin Mary, 163
- 12 September (at one time the Sunday within Octave of the Nativity of BVM), Holy Name of Mary, 164
- 8 December - Immaculate Conception, 82

A main consideration in my listing these Meditations is to indicate the sources where the student may find **St de La Salle's Marian teaching.** That for the *Feast of Our Lady of the Snows* has been indicated with asterisks because there more than anywhere else has our Founder developed his ideas on Marian devotion.

(Supplementary sources for a study of our Founder's Marian emphasis would be those Meditations devoted especially to the feasts of the Christmas Cycle; also N° 146 to St Anne.)

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

As I have pointed out in other articles in *Lasalliana*, I see our Holy Founder's preoccupation as largely *moralistic*: with him "speculative" is a pejorative term (cf what he says at the end of the Topics for Discussion at Recreation in the *Collecton*). In these Meditations what he directly envisages is the moral improvement of the Brothers; his aim is to help them on the way of religious perfection, to acquire the sanctity of their state...

Accordingly, in the Marian Meditations which I am considering, De La Salle does not attempt to develop a systematic Mariology nor does he go into any deep consideration of the theological significance of the feasts being commemorated; none the less a solid doctrinal basis is presumed and indeed in most cases recalled.

The first thing that comes out is his own appreciation of the wonderful **holiness** of Mary. De la Salle is not of that school of contemporary thought which begrudgingly begins any consideration of the Blessed Virgin's Feastdays by insisting on her "ordinariness": *how like she is to us.* (This approach, so it seems to me, confuses two perspectives: humanly speaking, looked at in her historical socio-cultural context, Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus, would possibly have seemed at first glance "ordinary"; neither the Gospels nor any authentic tradition attribute to her the gifts of miracles or prophecy or charismatic leadership. But we as Catholics *know* that "all the beauty of the King's daughter is within": that Mary is the masterpiece of God's creation (cf Meditation 82), that in creating her

God has, so to speak, exhausted his power; omnipotence can do no more in working with finitude ...

Thus De La Salle accepts the concept of Mary's Immaculate Conception because "it is the common belief of the faithful and the Church approves of it." (Catholic doctrine has *developed* since then; but our Founder had no catching up to do.

What De La Salle admires especially is "the grace of innocence and original justice which she never lost" (point 2 of the Meditation for that Solemnity). In point 3 he stresses that Mary was perfectly free from concupiscence (an idea which today few like to mention, since concupiscence itself has been sanitised, even sacralised...) In the meditation for the **Assumption** the Founder returns to the same idea: "the altogether exceptional purity of Mary".

His Meditation on the **Annunciation** is more directed to the significance of the Incarnation of the Son of God; but, in the first point, De La Salle underlines "the sublime honour which is hers of becoming the Mother of God". (It seems to me that today, with our vision myopically lowered to our own human horizons, we have lost the sense of *gratuitous exultation* in the beauty and glory of God and his saints, especially the Virgin Mother of Christ – something which the ears and the eyes of faith can detect in the lyrics of traditional hymns – e.g. "Virgin wholly marvellous ..." of Saint Ephrem – or in the canvasses of the Renaissance and other painters such as Fra Angelico or Velasquez ...)

This idea is hinted at in the Meditation for the **Nativity of Mary**: "She was adorned with all the qualities that were becoming to the Mother of God... with all the gifts of the Holy Ghost" (Here again De La Salle may affront some modern sensibilities: he accepts without hesitation or qualm that Mary "*was endowed with the gift of reason* from the moment of her [*Inmaculate*] conception...")

The Meditation for the Feast of the **Holy Name of Mary** stresses that we have a **special** devotion to the Blessed Virgin." (Given De La Salle's economy of style 'special' here doubtless means "special": it is not empty

rhetoric). The following passage may be considered thematic:

"We are under a particular obligation to have a great devotion to the most Blessed Virgin by reason of the fact that Almighty God Himself honours her in a special manner, having raised her above all pure creatures because she bore in her womb Him Who is equal to Himself, having the same nature as God"; and it is only after these considerations that we are reminded "if we have a true devotion towards the Most Blessed Virgin, nothing will be wanting to secure our salvation." The spelling-out of the *actualisation* of such devotion constitutes the third part of this rich Meditation: five indications are given which, in spirit if not in letter, are still embodied in our current Rule ...

CONCLUSION:

"... A true devotion"

May I be allowed to detect in that phrase an echo of the influence on our Founder of his younger contemporary, St Louis Grignon de Montfort (1673-1716). I do not know that there is in the extant writings of De La Salle any overt reference to Grignon de Montfort and his **Treatise on True Devotion**; but it is impossible that our Founder should not have been aware of his missionary work and intense Marian devotion. Similarly with the work of his predecessor, St John Eudes (1601-1680), whose apostolate to promote devotion to the Holy Heart of Mary would have been well known to our Founder.

A further reflection: to me it always seems strange that these two saints – especially St Grignon de Montfort – and their works should be widely recognized and our Founder so little known. Admittedly, De La Salle wrote almost exclusively for his Brothers and their pupils; but there must be some other factors obtaining. I could hazard an answer but I shall leave that to another time or to other hands. In the meantime, let us Brothers of the Christian Schools, sons and heirs of St John Baptist de La Salle, rejoice in and profit by the rich Marian heritage which is ours. •