

HEART - TO TOUCH HEARTS

[Lasallian Themes No.26 text slightly abridged]

Summary:

1. The expression. - 2. Conversion through the school. 2.1. Finality of the Institute. 2.2. To convert sinners. 2.3. To form true Christians. - 3. Who touches hearts? God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, Holy Scripture? - 4. What are the Brothers' concerns? 4.1. An obligation, 4.2. A spirituality.

1. The expression "to touch hearts" is not peculiar to St. John Baptist de La Salle. It forms part of the traditional religious language of the Church. Without going further back than that, we find it, among other texts, in a pontifical act of Pius V dated January 1566 to define the attitude of Christians towards heresies: "It is up to us, light of the world and salt of the earth (Mt. 5,13), to stimulate minds and touch hearts. We will achieve this through the example given by our holiness and our virtues".

The Founder's contemporaries who again use this expression are for the most part priests occupied in preaching the Lenten sermons and the parish missions, ideal times for conversions...

The idea that emerges from these texts is that of an action carried out by someone to bring about a change in life-style and notably a Christian practice. And the analysis of the two sections of the expression corroborate this way of thinking. "To touch" in the most expressive meaning of the word does not only signify "to reach", "to graze", "to make contact" but "to penetrate" in accordance with its use when dealing with weapons, hence the power of the figure of speech when one refers to the moral sphere. As for the word "Heart", it stands for what is most intimate, most deep and most personal in man, especially in whatever concerns the will: the intention, the re-solution and the going into action.

2. St. John Baptist de La Salle uses the expression "to touch hearts" 25 times¹. On another twelve occasions he uses expressions where only the verb "to touch" figures with an identical meaning. We note that it is always in an important context related to the finality of the Institute and the Lasallian charism: "Your employment would be of little use if it did not aim at the salvation of souls. Does your zeal for the poor make you look for means as efficacious as those used by St. Ignatius? The more you will apply yourself to meditation for the good of the souls entrusted to you, the more will God make it easy for you to touch hearts (MF 148.3).

But if the aim of the Lasallian school is to form Christians, it would be wrong to imagine that the way it is internally run is aimed solely at providing a good organisation or a smooth running of classroom activities. The management of the school is thought of as a contributor to the social, moral and religious formation of the students. And when these lack *discipline*,² a sin is always involved: sloth, anger, pride... That is why the Founder keeps repeating to the Brothers the advice St. Paul gave Timothy about gentleness: "He writes to him at the same time that he should be patient and moderate when correcting those who resist, because God may perhaps give them the spirit of repentance. As a matter of fact, this is one of the best means to conquer and to touch the hearts of those who have committed some fault and to help them to repent" (MR 204,2).

To fulfil then their ministry with regard to the children, the Brothers will not only inspire them with a horror of sin, but also and especially communicate to them the spirit of Christ and encourage them to live by it: "Do you have a faith that is able to touch the hearts of your pupils and to fill them with a Christian spirit? It is the greatest miracle that you can make and that which God demands of you since that is the aim of your employment" (MF

139.3), "You too can perform several miracles with regard to yourself and to your employment. As regards yourself, by entire fidelity to grace not allowing any inspiration to pass without corresponding thereto fully. As regards your employment, by touching the hearts of the children entrusted to your care; by rendering your children obedient to, and faithful in the practice of the maxims of the Gospel" (MF 180.3).

"Rest assured that as long as you remain deeply attached to the practice of poverty and all that can humiliate you, you will bear fruit in souls and that the angels of God will make you better known and will inspire fathers and mothers to send you their children to be instructed; and that, even through your teaching, you will touch the hearts of the poor children and that most of them will become genuine Christians" (MF 86.3). Become children like them, not in wisdom, but in malice, as St. Paul says. The more you make yourself small, the more will you be pleased to be treated as such, and the more ardently you cherish persecutions and humiliations which befall you, the more easily you will touch the hearts of those you instruct and the more easily you will induce them to live like true Christians (MF 79.2). We will have other opportunities to recall these strong and rich quotations.

3. Of course, in matters of conversion, it is God who has the initiative and who proceeds with the task until it is crowned with success. The Founder is categorical about that: "My God you are the only one who can truly touch and convert a heart..." (CL 17.179), often "Beg of God the grace to touch hearts like Him" (MF 81.2). "It is what this Saint has done so effectively through preaching the word of God and frequent and assiduous meditation to obtain the gift to touch hearts (MF 159.2). "He knew that it is up to God to touch and convert their hearts" (MF 168.2)³ and in a letter to Brother Robert, dated 1709: "I ask you to pray God to touch your heart and to make you docile to his will" (CL 61.4)⁴.

In the *Duties of a Christian* and the *Catechism Summaries*, St. John Baptist de La Salle dwells on the conversions operated by Jesus Christ during his apostolic life: "Jesus also touched the heart of the chief publican named Zacchaeus" (CL 2.38) and, about Peter: "Jesus looked at him to touch his heart when he had betrayed him in the *praetorium*, on the eve of the Passion" (CL 22.237). From his heavenly glory, the Risen Christ continues his saving mission: "Jesus Christ must touch a soul interiorly to make it listen, understand and enjoy what he has to say" (MD 64.3).

Consequently, the Holy Founder begs him to show in his regard the same kind of mercy: "Free me from my disorders and from my sins with the same kindness that you showed Zaccheus, the leader of the Publicans, and arouse in my heart the same sentiments of contrition which touched his own" (CL 17.184). "Aren't you the one who through the charm and attraction of your grace so strongly touched the heart of Mary Magdalen...? (CL 17.185). "I have put your patience to the test by the stubbornness and insensitivity of my heart, you have often pressed me to repent and to quit sinning and I have been more willing to continue to enjoy sinful pleasure than to listen to the interior voice which kept inviting me from the depth of my heart; but at last the time has come when you have touched and softened my heart and you put an end to my suffering and to my sins" (CL 17.209).

In like manner, the Holy Spirit plays an essential role, which St. John Baptist de La Salle does not underrate. He dwells on it with great precision when he deals with attrition "a divine gift and a movement of the Holy Spirit who does not yet dwell in the soul of the penitent but which only urges on and touches him and thanks to which he paves the way for justice and, although this contrition cannot by itself without the sacrament lead the sinner to justification, it prepares him nevertheless to obtain God's grace in this sacrament" (CL 20.290). A similar remark concerns the sin against the Spirit: "You cannot commit this type of sin without despising the means which the Holy Spirit uses to touch the heart, to convert

us and save us" (CL 21.127). Finally, it is the presence and action of the Holy Spirit within the Lasallian apostolate that makes the latter efficacious: "You are engaged in a ministry where-in you have to touch hearts.⁵ But you cannot possibly do this without the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Beseech God to confer on you to-day the same grace as He gave the Apostles, so that after filling you with His Spirit for your own sanctification, He may confer it on you for the salvation of others also." (MD 43.3).

The Founder underlines once more the privileged action of Scripture: "Oh how powerful is God's word to touch hearts! It is, says St. Paul, living and efficacious, it penetrates the heart better than would a two edged sword; it enters and penetrates in the very folds of the soul" (MF 180.2). "The spoken word is fleeting and touches the heart but once, whereas the written word remains. Thus it is that St. Luke's works continue for all time to bear fruit and are able to convert souls throughout the ages, right to the end of the world" (MF 178.3). He quotes the example of St. Augustine: "The reading of a single passage touched him and converted him" (MF 123.2). That is why he urges the Brothers to have a constant recourse in class to the Bible: "The teacher will not quote any example except from either of these two treatises and will in particular put into practice those taken from Holy Scripture, for hearts are more strongly impressed" and more easily touched, since this is the Word of God" (CL 24.46).

St. John Baptist de La Salle applies this re-mark to other spiritual books which the Brothers use; if God, in fact, acts personally through his grace on the souls of the faithful, he also intervenes through secondary causes: "As it is not the book nor the arguments that one hears that touches the conscience but God who uses these means, in the same way, we must ask from him the grace to operate in us the effects he meant it to have" (CL 15.107).

4. Among the secondary causes God uses, the most appropriate for man is man himself, whether he works at his own sanctification or that of the others: "It is our duty to carry out and finish the work of our redemption" (MF 191.1), "God... wishes that all be saved but he cannot want it re-ally without giving each the means to do it and therefore without giving the children teachers who help them to carry out that plan" (MR 193.3). It follows that, as is said in a passage quoted in Point 3, the Brothers "are obliged to touch hearts" (MD 43.3). The word "**obligation**" does not have in the XVIIth century the present meaning of "compulsion". It expresses only a moral bond which arises from a free agreement between one person and another.⁶ Hence, one can consider the Brother's obligations as consequences of his commitment to God's service in the Institute.

We have already come across the expression "the obligation to win hearts" (MF 115.3). Here is a third one, still on the same theme: "The obligation you are under to obtain graces not only for yourself but also for others and to strive to touch hearts, ought to encourage you to commit yourself in a particular way to meditation, an exercise which God has chosen to provide you with his graces"⁷(MF 129.2).

Because for St. John Baptist de La Salle, who combines a practical sense and the spirit of faith, to bind oneself by these obligations implies, besides taking concrete pedagogical means (as a matter of fact the whole of one's teaching experience), the support of a spirituality which will help them to bear "fruit"⁸, i.e. which will make their apostolate spiritually fruitful.

That is why he recommends particularly to his teachers:

Faith: "Do you possess a faith that is able to touch the hearts of your pupils and to inspire them with a Christian spirit? It is the greatest miracle which you can perform which God demands of you, since it is the purpose of your employment" (MF 139.3).

Obedience: "Such is the fruit of obedience. It draws down the blessings of God so abundantly on what we do, that we obtain all we wish. It gives us a great facility in doing good and touching hearts, when we have the advantage of working for the salvation of souls, and when we do so through pure obedience" (MD 57.2).

Humility and Poverty: "The humbler you are, and the more you like to be considered as such, the more will you love persecutions and humiliations which will be aroused against you, the more capable will you be to touch the hearts of those whom you instruct and will encourage them to live true Christian lives" (MF 79.2). "Rest assured that so long as you continue to practise poverty and all that can humiliate you, you will bear fruit in souls and the angels of God will make known to you and inspire their fathers and mothers to send you their children to be instructed; and that, even through your lessons you will touch the hearts of these poor children and that most of them will become true Christians" (MF 86.3)

Gentleness: "One of the best means to conquer and touch the hearts of those who have committed some fault and to dispose them to repent" (MR 204.2).

The spirit of prayer: "The more you apply yourself generously to meditation for the good of the souls entrusted to you, the more God will make it easy for you to touch hearts (MF 148.2); often "ask God to give you the grace to touch hearts as he does, it is the grace that suits your profession" (MF 81.2). See also MD 43.3 and MF 129.2 already quoted in the 2nd section.

Let us conclude with a quotation particularly felicitous and meaningful: "Ministers of God and of the Church", careful to "touch hearts, the Brothers carry out their mission with that "ardent zeal" which the Lord's work requires (Rule, 1987.21).

Selected Notes:

1. Note that the verb "toucher" used in isolation does not always have the meaning we have just seen, e.g. as a short cut for the expression "to touch hearts". It possesses its own usage and usually means to impress the intellectual faculty and sensitize the will, as for example: "Are you touched by and sensitive to what concerns God only?" (MF 125.3) Letter 111 which the Founder wrote to the Aldermen of Chateau-Porcien offers a very significant example: "...I would be insensitive not to allow myself to be touched means here to convince, hence the two consequences drawn by the author, one negative: "It would be very wrong of me, gentlemen, not to send you any school teachers..." (L 111.2), the other positive "...as early as next Saturday, I will send you two school teachers" (L 111.3).
2. This word has a very strong meaning in the writings of St. La Salle. It does not only mean discipline inside the school, but refers to the universal order intended by God, of which this discipline is only one of the innumerable effects.
3. Today we think this meditation was not written by the Founder cf. CL 47.539. However, his way of thinking has been respected.
4. This sentence has not been listed in the *Vocabulaire Lasallien*.
5. Sometimes, this sentence is quoted incompletely, as if ending after "toucher les coeurs" (as if St. John Baptist de La Salle had placed a fullstop instead of comma and so the explanation which he is careful to add is omitted. In this total commitment it is possible to infer the pedagogical advice to establish between teacher and pupil a relationship founded on affection and trust, that seems to be what the heart is all about. To shorten the sentence is to empty it of its supernatural and pastoral content. In order to convey his concern about the fraternal relationship, the Founder employs the expression "to win hearts over".
6. "You must consider the obligation you are under to win hearts over as one of the principal means to urge them to live in a Christian manner" (MF 115.3). It goes without saying that if the Brother must strive to win over

the hearts of his pupils, it is not for his own personal satisfaction but to win them over to God: "They should be totally dedicated to their pupils' welfare to win them over to Jesus Christ" (CL 24.186).

7. If the expressions by means of which St. John Baptist de La Salle designates the impact made by an action on another person to transform him (in particular the Brother's apostolic activity towards his "disciples") "to impress strongly" would take its place just before "to touch hearts". The first expression shows an immediate effect, important but not wholly efficacious. The second already leads the way to a definitive result. "To touch the heart" of someone is the "final impression" made on him. God has nothing else to do but to bring about his conversion.

8. Many texts could be quoted such as the following: "If you wish to bear much fruit in souls through your ministry..." (MF 136.1), "...your ministry in favour of those whom you instruct will be fruitful" (MF 148,3).

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