

ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE and MARIAN DEVOTION

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In these few pages, I shall briefly pinpoint the French Marian spirituality of which John Baptist de La Salle forms part. I shall highlight some studies on the Marian devotion of the Founder and I shall give some attention to the interesting synthesis given by Canon Blain. I shall endeavour above all to highlight, though only partially through lack of space, the theocentrism and Christocentrism of doctrine and of lasallian piety.

1. The current of spirituality and Marian devotion in France in the 17th century

The spiritual writings of John Baptist de La Salle did not, at that time, have the sort of fame which they deserved.

In the climate of spirituality that developed in France beginning with Pierre de Berulie, La Salle remained in the background and was, as a consequence, rather ignored as a spiritual writer. Look at a list of spiritual writers of the great French century that has acquired a rather glorious halo. You will come across Berulie and the writers of the Oratory: Condren, Bourgoing, Gibieuf, Amelote, Nicolas Larcheveque and Cloyseault.

Outside the Oratory, you will find the disciples of Berulie: Olier, Vincent de Paul, Bossuet; several Jesuits: Saint-Jure, Louis Lallemand followed by Rigoleuc, Champion, Huby, Surin, Guillore, Nouet, Jean Crasset (dear to our Founder). Other famous men should be noted: Jean de Bemieres de Louvigny, Grignon de Monfort, Henri-Marie Boudon. In 1630, Father Francois Poire, S.J. became known for *The Triple Crown of the Mother of God*. His work would be taken up and perfected by Mother Marie-Jacqueline Bouette de Blemur, a Benedictine, who published it in 1681 under the title of *Glories of the Mother of God*.

I am drawing on a good part of this nomenclature from the Oratorian, A. Molien's, book: *The Glories of Mary according to the writers of the French school*. I would have been proud to see John Baptist de La Salle's name among them. Alas, this work does not contain the slightest text from the holy canon of Rheims.

2. Among a few minor works

Some authors, such as Albert Tesniere, S.S.S., have extolled the *eucharistic Mission of Blessed John Baptist de La Salle*, or have presented him as a **Glory and model for the clergy**, as did Fr. J. Cellier, but, as far as I know, nothing as important has been published on the Marian mind and Marian theology of John Baptist de La Salle. I am aware of a few Canadian works that have outlined something in this direction. What would be really

pleasing would be something like a thesis for a doctorate. It is obvious that I would not make up for the absence of a serious work in an article of a few pages.

I must, therefore, concentrate on a quite precise aspect in the Marian devotion of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

3. A well-informed and thinking witness: John Baptist Blain

Could we forget a first-class witness, Canon Blain, who lived in close proximity to our Holy Founder? In *Spirit*

and *Virtues*, Blain devoted five reflective pages to tell us of the Marian sense of our spiritual guide. They are in chapter V of book IV.

4. Characteristics of La Salle's devotion to Mary

I have spoken about the first section. In the second section, Blain showed the definite characteristics of the Marian devotion of our Holy Founder. For the most part they refer to facts which we have often been told. We can, therefore, be brief without inconveniencing our readers. Blain speaks of the practice of pilgrimages: Notre-Dame de Liesse. (He says nothing of the one to Aubervilliers in 1690; B 1, 298). This confidence in Mary rests on her title of "treasurer of God's graces". La Salle put his heart and soul into making Mary honoured. Blain forgot the episode in which La Salle was in a church on Assumption day. He remonstrated with the preacher because he neglected to speak of Mary. Did Blain have this story in mind when he wrote: *words to rail against those who, by a rashness bordering on impiety, condemned this devotion "Sometimes he could not find strong enough* .. To honour the Most Blessed Virgin, is to name her with respect by always (or nearly always) referring to her as the "most blessed", because she is worthy of it. It is also to celebrate all her feastdays with a particular devotion. More especially, it is to say the Rosary every day.

Blain stresses the use of the Rosary: La Salle was famed as the "priest of the rosary". In his schools he established the presence of two pupils, in turn, who would ensure the recitation of the rosary during the day. This practice was continued for only a few years after the death of the Founder. Blain also loved to state how often La Salle used to refer to himself proudly as the Servant of Mary. His devotion was warm and heartfelt: "Through the Most Blessed Virgin, he obtained abundant graces. He threw himself into Mary's arms on every occasion, as a child into the arms of its Mother. He never undertook an important matter without having recommended it to the Most Blessed Virgin. He finished every action of the day with a *Sub tuum praesidium*. After mental prayer and the rosary he had the *O Domina mea* recited", a prayer which he had learned in Saint Sulpice possibly.

We know that La Salle had the six-decade rosary recited, sometimes known as Saint Bridget's rosary and also the Crown of Our Lady. This Crown of Our Lady, ascribed to Saint John Capistrano, has a total of 63 Hail Marys intending to honour the supposed sixty-three years of Mary's life on earth. Our Founder explained a way of saying the Rosary (DB 4,13). We know the esteem he had for the litanies of Loretto, the Angelus, the

angelic greeting, and the stanza *Maria Mater gratiae*, which he included in the evening prayer and which he was saying at the moment of his death: "*Tu nos ab hoste protege, et mortis hora suscipe*".

La Salle crowned all these devotions by the practice of saying the Little Office of the Most Blessed Virgin. Peter Damien had popularised the recitation of this Little Office which the canons and monks added to the Great Office. La Salle kept it for his Novices, but, occasionally, the Brothers who remained behind on Sundays recited it together. Finally, we remember that the Founder gave a half-hour talk to the Brothers before supper on the feastdays of the Most Blessed Virgin.

This display of devotions, practices and prayers, is justified by a theological point of view of the strength of intercession that the Virgin Mary had. In his Treatise on Prayer, John Baptist de La Salle wrote: "*If it is useful (and fitting) to pray to all the saints, it is far more useful to address our prayers to the Most Blessed Virgin. She is the most perfect creature and the highest in glory, and has, therefore, great power with God, and by her intercession she can help us very much to reach salvation and in all our needs. She does not refuse help to those who ask her with sincere piety and with a heart free from all inclination to sin*" (DA 404,3,1).

This is a quite good picture of our Father's Marian devotion, according to the viewpoint of his first published biography.

5. Theocentric Marian doctrine

The aspect of John Baptist de La Salle's Marian devotion that I would like to stress, is its theocentrism and Christocentrism. The stumbling block that has always beset the homage due to the Virgin Mary is the one that would. They are worth reading. It is not surprising to see Canon Blain beginning with a preface called: "Summary of the reasons which show that love of Mary is inseparable from that of Jesus". He goes on to show the content proper to La Salle. Blain presents his point of view in two parts. First, he speaks of de La Salle's zeal for the devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin, telling us...*that "this devotion was very dear to him"*, and he reveals him to us as ready to "*defend and extend*" this devotion. Blain considered La Salle as "*eloquent in promoting such a reasonable, just and good devotion*".

In his eloquent persuading, the Founder put forward certain doctrinal points which showed what God has done for the Virgin Mary. He has given her to us as our mother, he has made her Queen of Angels and of human beings. He encourages us to make a difference in the devotion we have towards her, and that towards the other saints. Among the titles which honour the Virgin Mary, pride of place is given to that of Mother of God, the fullness of her grace, her holiness, the greatness of her authority and her powers. As Mother of mercy, she is interested in our salvation, with nothing dearer to her than causing the precious blood of her Son to be valued; and seeing it profited by. In a way it is Mary who is also the channel of the graces won by the merits of Jesus and it is he who distributes them through her.

This grouping of doctrinal elements is the foundation of our love for Mary. It is the positive aspect.

These are words that certainly belong to our Founder. To doubt that would be discourteous to the normal sincerity of Canon Blain.

In a second section, the ideas attributed to the Founder seem to form an array of weapons against the arguments opposing devotion to Mary. Were it to be suggested that Marian devotion was a "novelty", La Salle would show to the contrary that it was a universal, long-standing, well-founded devotion, that it was based on the feelings of the Fathers and the Councils, on the example of the Saints and Doctors and that to pass it off as a novelty was tantamount to siding with the protestants. We will dwell for a moment on the important place which the teaching of the Fathers had in the Marian doctrine of John Baptist de La Salle: the Anselms, the Augustines, the John Damascenes, the Ambroses, the Epiphaniuses, the Bernards have pride of place there. This aspect alone would provide material for another article. It is a bold step to oppose Marian devotion since God was pleased to confirm it by an infinite number of miracles worked in all ages and everywhere in the Church. To refuse this devotion is to oppose God's will, since, in so many ways, he displays the wish to see the Virgin Mary honoured in the Church.

It is not impossible that one or two of these ideas were written by Canon Blain, influenced by Grignon de Montfort, whose biographer he was before being our Founder's. To establish that with any confidence would require a very meticulous study. We would, though, be correct in supposing that Blain was able to separate the two sources for himself.

Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, LES DEVOIRS D'UN CHRÉTIEN ENVERS DIEU

Par Blain

<p>INSTRUCTION 13 DU CHAPELET ET DE L'ANGELUS</p> <p>4 13 01</p> <p>D Pourquoi l'Église fait-elle dire souvent la salutation angélique?</p> <p>R C'est pour quatre raisons:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Pour nous faire souvenir du mystère de l'Incarnation.2. Pour nous former aux vertus de la très sainte Vierge.3. Pour l'engager plus fortement à prier Dieu pour nous.4. Parce que cette prière est très agréable à Dieu et à la très sainte Vierge.	<p>Lesson 13—The rosary and the <i>Angelus</i></p> <p>Why does the Church desire us to recite the Angelical Salutation often?</p> <p>There are four reasons:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1) to remind us of the mystery of the Incarnation,2) to help us imitate the virtues of the Most Blessed Virgin,3) to have her more insistently pray to God for us, and4) to show that this prayer is most agreeable to God and to the Most Blessed Virgin.
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D Est-il utile de dire, et de réciter souvent la même prière surtout la salutation angélique?

R Oui, cela est fort utile, pourvu qu'on le fasse toujours avec affection et avec dévotion.

4 13 02

D Quelles sont les prières dans lesquelles on répète souvent la salutation angélique?

R C'est le chapelet et la prière qu'on nomme *Angelus*.

D Qu'est-ce que le chapelet?

R C'est une prière adressée à la très sainte Vierge composée du *Credo*, de sept *Pater*, de sept *Gloria Patri*, et de soixante-trois *Ave Maria*.

D Le chapelet est-il une prière bien agréable à Dieu, et à la très sainte Vierge?

R Oui, cette prière leur est très agréable.

4 13 03

D Pourquoi dit-on soixante-trois *Ave Maria*, en récitant le chapelet?

R C'est pour honorer les soixante-trois années qu'a vécu, à ce qu'on croit, la très sainte Vierge.

D Pourquoi, en récitant le chapelet, dit-on *Pater noster* avant chaque dizaine d'*Ave Maria*?

R C'est pour témoigner à Dieu qu'on reconnaît qu'il est le principe et l'auteur de toutes les grâces qu'a reçues la très sainte Vierge, et de toutes celles qu'on espère d'obtenir par son intercession.

4 13 04

D Pourquoi dit-on *Gloria Patri*, à la fin de chaque dizaine d'*Ave Maria* en récitant le chapelet?

R C'est pour rendre gloire à Dieu, et le remercier de toutes les grâces qu'il nous a accordées, par l'intercession de la très

Is it useful to say and often repeat the same prayer, especially the Angelical Salutation?

Yes, it is most useful, provided we always do so with affection and devotion.

What prayers frequently repeat the Angelical Salutation?

They are the rosary and the prayer called *Angelus*.

What is the rosary?

The rosary is a prayer addressed to the Most Blessed Virgin and composed of the *Credo*, the *Pater Noster* and the *Gloria Patri*, seven times each, and the *Ave Maria*, sixty-three times.

Is the rosary a prayer that is very agreeable to God and to the Most Blessed Virgin?

Yes, this prayer is most agreeable to them.

Why do we say sixty-three *Ave Maria*'s when reciting the rosary?

It is to honor the sixty-three years that the Most Blessed Virgin is believed to have lived.

When reciting the rosary, why do we say the *Pater Noster* before each decade of the *Ave Maria*?

It is to show God that we recognize him as the first principle and author of all the graces received by the Most Blessed Virgin and all those we hope to receive through her intercession.

When reciting the rosary, why do we say the *Gloria Patri* at the end of each decade of the *Ave Maria*?

By doing so, we give glory to God and thank God for all the graces he grants us by the intercession of the Most Blessed

sainte Vierge, pour avoir imploré son secours dans cette prière.

D Peut-on croire qu'il y ait une telle vertu dans le nombre de Pater, d'Ave et de Gloria Patri, dont le chapelet est composé, qu'on ne doive en dire ni plus ni moins, pour obtenir ce qu'on demande par cette prière?

R Ce serait une superstition de le croire, quoiqu'en disant ce nombre on fasse un acte de religion, en rendant gloire à Dieu, et honorant la très sainte Vierge.

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4 13 05

D Qui sont ceux qui doivent souvent réciter le chapelet?

R Ce sont particulièrement ceux qui ne savent pas lire, ou qui d'eux-mêmes ne savent pas assez bien prier Dieu.

D Que faut-il faire avant que de commencer le chapelet?

R Il faut faire quatre choses:

1. Faire un acte d'humilité et de contrition de ses péchés.
2. Prendre quelque intention pour laquelle on le dise.
3. Unir son intention à celle de toute l'Église.
4. Avoir dessein de glorifier Dieu par cette prière, et d'honorer la très sainte Vierge.

4 13 06

D Comment faut-il dire le chapelet?

R Pour bien réciter le chapelet, il est à propos d'entrer dans les sept pratiques suivantes. Il faut:

1. Se mettre en la sainte présence de Dieu.
2. Faire sur soi le signe de la sainte croix.
3. Baiser celle qui est au haut du chapelet.

Virgin, whose help we have asked for in this prayer.

May we believe that there is such special virtue in the number of the *Pater Noster*, *Ave Maria*, and *Gloria Patri* prayers that make up the rosary that we should never say either more or less to receive what we ask for in this prayer?

It would be superstitious to believe such a thing, but by saying this number of prayers, we perform an act of religion in glorify-ing God and honoring the Most Blessed Virgin.

Who should frequently recite the rosary?

It is those in particular who do not know how to read or how to pray to God very well on their own.

What should we do before beginning the rosary?

We should do four things:

- 1) make acts of humility and contrition for our sins,
- 2) determine some intention for which we will pray,
- 3) unite our prayers to those of the whole Church, and
- 4) intend to glorify God and honor the Most Blessed Virgin by this prayer.

How should we say the rosary?

To recite the rosary well, we should adopt the following seven practices:

- 1) place ourselves in the holy presence of God,
- 2) make the sign of the cross,
- 3) kiss the crucifix on our rosary beads,

4. Dire la prière *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, demandant au Saint-Esprit la grâce de dire cette prière, avec toute l'attention et toute la dévotion possible.

5. Faire la profession de sa foi, en disant: *Credo in Deum* en latin, ou en français, afin d'avoir part à la foi de la sainte Vierge.

6. Sur les gros grains, il faut dire *Pater noster*, etc. Sur les petits grains *Ave Maria*, en latin ou en français.

7. Il faut dire *Gloria Patri*, à la fin de chaque dizaine d'*Ave Maria*.

4 13 07

D Que doit-on faire quand on commence le chapelet, et qu'on récite *Pater* sur le premier gros grain?

R Il faut faire trois choses:

1. Adorer Dieu.
2. Le prier d'agréer la prière qu'on va lui faire.

3. Lui demander la grâce pour la bien faire.

D À quoi peut-on penser en récitant le chapelet?

R On peut penser à quelque mystère de Notre-Seigneur ou de la très sainte Vierge, ou demander à Dieu la grâce de ne le plus offenser, ou quelque autre grâce particulière, par les mérites de Notre-Seigneur, et par l'intercession de la très sainte Vierge.

4 13 08

D Comment faut-il finir le chapelet?

R Il faut le finir en se mettant sous la protection de la très sainte Vierge, et lui disant pour cet effet l'oraison *Sub tuum*, etc. ou *O domina mea*, etc.

D Que faut-il faire après avoir fini le chapelet?

4) say the prayer *Veni Sancte Spiritus* to ask the Holy Spirit for the grace to say this prayer with all possible attention and devotion,

5) profess our faith by reciting *Credo in Deum*, in Latin or in French, so as to share in the faith of the Most Blessed Virgin,

6) say the *Pater Noster* on the large beads and the *Ave Maria* on the small ones, in Latin or in French, and

7) say the *Gloria Patri* at the end of each decade of the *Ave Maria*.

What should we do when we begin the rosary and recite *Pater Noster* on the first large bead?

We should do three things:

1) adore God,
2) ask him to be pleased with this prayer we are going to offer him, and
3) ask for the grace to pray it well.

What can we think about while reciting the rosary?

We can think about some mystery in the life of our Lord or of the Most Blessed Virgin, or we can ask God for the grace never to offend him or for some other special grace through the merits of our Lord and the intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin.

How should we conclude the rosary?

We should say the prayer *Sub Tuum* [We fly to thy patronage] or *O Domina mea* [O Holy Queen] to place ourselves under the protection of the Most Blessed Virgin.

What should we do after finishing the rosary?

R Il faut faire un acte de contrition des fautes qu'on a commises en le disant, et remercier Dieu des grâces qu'on a obtenues en récitant cette prière.

We should make an act of contrition for the faults committed while saying it and then thank God for the graces we have received by reciting this prayer.

