

# ASSOCIATION IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE

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## Introduction:

The Scriptures tell the story of a *History of Salvation* that could also be called "*the adventure of the Covenant.*" God encounters man and makes his covenant with him. It is a covenant with concrete persons, with a concrete people; but the purpose of that covenant always goes beyond those persons and that people; the purpose is the salvation of all, but with a special concern for the poorest, the little ones.

The Covenant begins on a vertical scale: it is God' initiative - God who approaches and calls out to mankind; but right away it develops in a horizontal way, it promotes a style of relationships, a type of community/society that is presented as a sign of the salvation that God offers, the Kingdom that includes all and that has a privileged place for the little ones.

- *The Covenant is for salvation.*
- In current ecclesiology the translation would be: *communion is for mission.*
- And its translation in the Lasallian lexicon would be: *association is for the educational service of the poor.*
- That is, the biblical name of Lasallian association is "*Covenant.*"

The adventure of the Covenant is disclosed little by little throughout the Bible, and it reaches its peak moment in the Resurrection of Jesus and in the coming of the Spirit.

A selection of certain moments of this adventure (only as a sampling) will allow us to highlight the most significant and enlightening traits for our particular adventure of the covenant which is Association in the Lasallian charism.

## 1. ABRAHAM, GOD'S FRIEND: A LIFESTYLE

The Covenant begins to become a historic event in the figure of Abraham, the Father of believers. Let us try to note some of the characteristics that are already present:

1. It is a *personal* relationship between God and the man Abraham.  
The initiative comes from God. Man is invited to enter into a journey that he is not familiar with and that God will point out for him; he has to trust God and be attentive to his signs.
2. It is a *community* relationship that integrates man into a broader context: "*your offspring*" (Genesis 17:7), within which the Covenant sets up a *lifestyle*: "*walk before me, and be blameless.*" (Genesis 17:1). Later on this lifestyle is spelled out in the Mosaic Law.
3. It is a relationship that goes out of its way to show the saving will of God: "*and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves*" (Genesis 22:18). The Covenant with this person/group is made manifest in the link - the sign - that will permit the Covenant to extend to all humankind. It is the expression of the encounter between God and humankind.

## **2. THE PROPHETS: SENTRIES OF THE COVENANT**

They define themselves as *sentries of the Covenant* but not from the outside as civil servants, but rather by themselves being identified with that same Covenant.

1. They live their relationship with God intensely, even dramatically, as in the case of Jeremiah. Therefore the Word of God is a "*burning fire*" (Jeremiah 20:9) in them that burns them from the inside and they cannot hold it in. They see themselves as God's instruments.

2. They are the sign of the Covenant for their people. In them the people feel themselves as being both condemned and comforted. In them the people feel that God in his encounters tries to draw them to himself.

3. The prophets are also sentries of the purpose of the Covenant. Therefore they cry foul when the people try to use it for their own security or when the lifestyle and the values of the people do not agree with its stated purpose. Above all, the prophets are attentive so that the principal beneficiaries are really being helped: the poor, orphans, the undervalued among the people.

## **3. THE SERVANT OF YAHWEH: A REDEEMING COMMUNION**

This mysterious figure of the second book of Isaiah is, no doubt, that which best embodies the Covenant and Salvation in the Old Testament, united together in his person: Isaiah 42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 53:12.

- First of all, the Servant is spoken of totally *in reference to God*, from whom the initiative comes, who chose him and sent him, and who sustains him. He carries with him the *Spirit of God* and this is the only guarantee that he receives to carry out his mission.

- Secondly, this very special intimacy with God is directly linked to the mission that he has received: "*I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth*" (Isaiah 49:6). He is the *Covenant for Salvation*, a Salvation that is universal.

- Finally, the Servant is identified with the most wretched among the people, in a *redeeming communion*. His mission is universal, but it is centered in the poor. He presents himself as poor, rejected, the one who carries the burdens of others. This is how he becomes a *sign of salvation* for all the wretched in this society. There is nothing in him that is triumphal nor are there resources to easy means. His mission is doomed to fail. But God keeps his Covenant and he will be the one who assures the mission beyond all appearances.

## **4. THE NEW COVENANT AND THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS**

In the New Testament the Covenant is made new in Jesus and his Church. The community character of the call is emphasized. Communion assumes the central place in the mission.

- The Synoptic Gospels present the call of the Twelve as the formation process for the community of Jesus: "*And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message*" (Mark 3:14). The Covenant and the Saving Mission are

explicitly united.

The call continues being a personal one, but immediately it is noted that it not for a solitary following of Jesus, but to *unite oneself to the group* of his followers.

Within that community Jesus works to achieve *its own style* that will be presented as the sign of God's Kingdom that is coming.

- In John's Gospel the choice of the disciples is within a symbolic context of the New Creation and the New Covenant represented by the Wedding Feast.

The first two chapters of the Gospel symbolically tell the story of this New Creation which began with the appearance of the Light - now identified with Jesus - and which culminated with the creation of man and woman - the wedding - in parallel with the story of Genesis. Between one event and the other are six days in which the disciples enter into personal contact with Jesus, they enter his house beginning with the invitation that Jesus give them: "*Come and see*" (John 1:39).

The Wedding Feast at Cana represents the creation of the New Man, the first miracle of Jesus. The water for purification of the Jews - the old Law - is changed into the good wine of messianic times. The disciples enter into communion with Jesus , accepting the new lifestyle that accompanies his message: "*Do whatever he tells you*" (John 2:5), as the Mother of Jesus suggests, represented in this passage as the faithful Remnant of the people of Israel. What is most characteristic about this New Man is represented in communion: *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*" (John 13:35).

## **5. A COMMUNITY ANIMATED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT**

The gift of the Risen Jesus to the community of his disciples in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit arrives when all are gathered together (Acts 2: 1) and his presence is related to the communion and the mission of the community.

The book of the Acts of the Apostles has as its principal protagonist the Holy Spirit, and its action is strongly linked to the community of the followers of Jesus: in this community it is the *force that calls and attracts*, but also it is the *force that drives and sends* to proclaim the message of Jesus. It unites the disciples in *one heart and soul* (Acts 4:32) and in this way it sets them up as a questioning sign for those who see them from the outside. But at the same time it stops them from being self-complacent in their community life and it pushes them to open themselves to the newness that the mission brings with it. This can all be summed up in this way: *the Spirit recreates community based on the demands of the mission*.

What the book of the Acts passes on to us in narrative form, St. Paul will do in a descriptive and doctrinal way. He speaks to us about a community - one Church - that is built up based on the gifts that the Holy Spirit distributes among its members; "*and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone*" (1 Corinthians: 6). And all gifts are for the common good and must be discerned based on that common good. So then, the charisma par excellence is that of love, all the rest must be subject to this. (1 Corinthians 13).

## **6. COLLABORATORS IN CHRIST, ASSOCIATED FOR MISSION**

It is interesting that we refer to this passage of St. Paul, although it is not the only one in

which mention is made of a great diversity of persons (twenty-eight, in fact), all of them united in communion and in the mission next to Paul and for different reasons: Romans 16: 1-16.

Some, like Paul, are *consecrated for life* to the ministry of the Word; others carry out, with greater or lesser intensity, *explicitly missionary tasks*, among whom two married couples are cited; many others simply support *the charism of the presence*, affective support, solidarity in difficult times and when suffering is present. All of them *share the risk of faith* for the cause of Christ. Among them their social origin varies a great deal: men and women, slaves and free...

It is the concrete example of *association for mission* among consecrated and the laity: it is not only collaborating in the work but *communion in lives*, fraternal relationships, professed affection, shared responsibilities...and without "a priori" priorities of some over others.

## **7. THE TRINITY, SOURCE OF COMMUNION FOR MISSION**

It is the great revelation of the New Testament: God is a Communion of Persons, a communion that goes beyond itself and projects itself into a mission of salvation, and a mission that convenes communion. This is the central message of Jesus.

We have a wonderful synthesis in Chapter 17 of John, the so-called "*Priestly prayer of Jesus*": the unity of Jesus with the Father is put forward as a model for believers, and the unity that exists between them is put forward as a sign of the salvation that comes through Jesus.

Nevertheless, communion among the believers is not presented as the logical result of their efforts, but as their union with Jesus. "*I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one...*" (John 17:23). As John will say in his first letter: "*Love is from God*" (1 John 4:7). Our love is born and sustained in that of God, and our missionary effort is the result of communion between ourselves and with God. That is how Jesus expresses his missionary work, as a result of his communion with the Father, and the result of his mission is the communion that exists among his disciples.

The glory of God is his saving activity with mankind; therefore to consecrate oneself to the glory of God is the same as participating in his desire to save mankind and to do it based on the essence of God, which is communion.

Association, according to the way De La Salle understood it, finds here its deepest motivation.

## **8. READING DE LA SALLE: PARTICIPATING IN THE WORK OF GOD, IN THE ZEAL OF GOD**

De La Salle read the Scriptures in the light of life and he read life in the light of Scripture. As he and the Brothers were searching for the deep meaning of what they were experiencing in their lives, he discovered that the root of their association made up was the saving will of God: "*God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*" (1 Timothy 2:4), but also in God's plan of wanting to rely on mankind to carry out his salvation, De La Salle identifies with the expression that Paul makes about his own personal experience: "*For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

De La Salle writes his Meditations for the Time of Retreat using this double axis: a reading of Salvation History based on the perspective of this *association for the educational service of the poor*.

And because he discovers that that reading is not exclusive to the Brothers - consecrated celibates in community - he therefore offers it *"to all those who dedicate themselves to the education of youth."*

- The heart of his reflection is found in Meditation 201: there De La Salle discloses for us the profound sense of Lasallian Association as an experience of communion and participation in the very life of the Trinity.

The meditation begins by pointing out the origin of the mission - God himself - and the framework in which it is shared - the Church community - *"Reflect on what St. Paul says: 'And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers' (1 Corinthians 12:28)..."* (1.1).

The initiative and the way of participating in the mission God has established, since it is he who calls each one: *"It is also God who has established you in your work"* (1.1). *"It is God who has called you, who has destined you for this work, and who has sent you to work in his vineyard"* (1.2).

- Always in the light of the Word of God, De La Salle shows us the three Persons carrying out the mission of salvation, each in his own way, and each one associating in the same dynamism as the Church and her ministers.

The order in which the Divine Persons are presented is also significant:

- It begins with the action of the Spirit, and in that way underscoring the ecclesial dimension of the mission: the Spirit *distributes its gifts* and is made manifest in them *"for common use"*, that is to say, the Founder explains, *"for the use of the Church"* (1.1).

- then it is Jesus Christ who takes the leading role, but he is also presented next to the Church; it unites in one expression being ministers *"of Jesus Christ and the Church."* And in the center of the meditation the Church is shown to us as *"the body of Christ"*, taking on the saving mission, *"animated by a fervent zeal for the sanctification of her children"*: let us note the appropriate request of the Founder: *"It is your duty to participate in her zeal..."*

- Finally, we reach the origin itself of the mission: the Father, who shares his saving will with his own Son, sending him to the world, *"so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life"* (3.1; John 3:16). With one exclamation he then highlights the fact that this mission of salvation might be shared by both, and in all of this he receives support to invite us to do the same: *"See what God and Jesus Christ have done to restore souls to the grace they had lost. What must you not do for them in your ministry if you have a zeal for their salvation!"* (3.1).

- The dynamism of participation in the mission, according to this Meditation 201, is carried out completely under the sign of the Covenant. It does not seem forced to predict in the background of the Meditation the phrase of Jeremiah that spoke of the New Covenant: *"But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people"* (Jeremiah 31:33). The Founder takes "the Pauline version" of the phrase of Jeremiah when he says about those who proclaim the Gospel that *"write the letter which he (Jesus Christ) has dictated not with ink but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh which are the hearts of children"* (2.1; cf. 2 Corinthians 3:3).

Along the same lines are the various expressions that De La Salle highlights as how one ought to participate in the mission: *"with all your heart"* (1.2); *"the love of God ought to impel you"* (2.1)...

Furthermore, look at the direct reference in point 2 regarding the Pauline image of the New Covenant, the marriage of Jesus with his Church; the Founder presents this as a paradigm of the

relationship of love that ought to exist between the minister-educator and his disciples; and the reason is that in this relationship the creative love of Christ for his Church is being fulfilled, as he makes them *"enter truly into the structure of this building, and be in condition to appear one day before Jesus Christ full of glory, without stain, without wrinkle, without blemish"* (2.2; Ephesians 5:27).

This, then, is Meditation 201: first of all, the portrait of Communion for the Mission in its most original sources: the Trinity, Jesus Christ, and the Church; and the view of these sources, the invitation to share and to enter *"zealously"* into this covenant; we share God's Work (1.1) and work in the Lord's vineyard (1.2); we share the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given us to build up the Church (1.1); we share the zeal of Jesus Christ for his Church, and that of the Church for her faithful (2.2); we share the zeal of God for the salvation of souls (3.1) and that of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, for his sheep (3.2)...

*(Translated from the Spanish by Brother John L. Blease, FSC - Rome Generalate)*