

LASALLIAN PRAYER

Brother Gerard Rummery

SOME PERSPECTIVES

Lasallian prayer is a complex but extremely rich topic. In this presentation we will not try to cover everything that can be said but will concentrate on what De La Salle's teaching on prayer offers to busy teachers who are trying to carry out the ministry of teaching in Lasallian schools and institutions. This is not a teaching for persons in enclosed monasteries and cloisters but rather one shaped for the person who must meet the challenges of ordinary daily life in meeting young people where they are.

To enter into such a topic it is necessary first of all to give some indication of the range of writings on prayer which La Salle has left as part of his spiritual heritage. This will lead us first of all to appreciate some of his remarkable insights into the importance of prayer in the life of a Christian teacher, and secondly, to discover a kind of practical mysticism which can enrich the circumstances and challenges of daily life.

1. What are the sources of teaching on Lasallian Prayer?

The sources for La Salle's teaching on prayer fall into two main categories. There is what could be called the formal teaching which he offers through the works which he composed for the theological formation of the Brothers and for the catechetical instruction of the pupils in the schools. These are the Lasallian writings called *The Duties of a Christian* Nos.1, 2, 3, 4 & 5. These works can be described generally, but not exclusively, as including formal and descriptive teaching about prayer. Similar to these writings, there are the works used in the schools with the pupils, such as *Instructions and Prayers for Mass, for Confession and Communion*, and the *Exercises of Piety for use in the Christian Schools*. Besides including the traditional Christian prayers, these works include many examples of vernacular prayers in simple language which helped the young pupils to be introduced to the great themes of praise, adoration, contrition and thanksgiving. It is worth indicating the nature and scope of some of these prayers because most aspects of formal Church worship were conducted in Latin. De La Salle composed many prayers in French so that the pupils in the school would be able to deepen their understanding of the great mysteries of the Christian faith. Notice the sequence of praise, personal offering, petition and resolve in the following example:

- The hour prayers e.g. *Blessed be the day and the hour of the birth death and Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. O my God, I give you my heart. Grant that I may pass this day and the rest of my life in serving you. I will continue, O my God, to do all actions for the love of you.*
- the important collection of hymns in the vernacular [*Whoever sings well, prays twice*] in French for attending Mass and participating in the general movement of the Mass at a time when everything was in Latin;
- the prayers and examination of conscience which he developed to help pupils prepare for and receive the sacrament of penance.

A second series of writings, addressed directly to the Brothers, aimed at helping them develop their life of prayer as something essential to their "state" as persons dedicated to the ministry of Christian education. These writings include the summary of his teachings on prayer: the little book known as the *Collection*, the *Rules* of his Institute, the *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, and, most abundantly, the *Meditations for Sundays and Feasts* and the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*. We have also some glimpses of his own interior life in La Salle's 20 personal resolutions, seemingly made during a retreat, the so-called *Rules which I have Imposed on Myself*. These aspects will not be considered in the text that follows but they are important to understand La Salle's own spiritual attitudes towards prayer.

2. What are the main lines of La Salle's teaching on Prayer?

In a century which was marked by bitter and sustained controversies about prayer, especially with regard to the importance and implied superiority of contemplative prayer in the Carmelite and monastic traditions, when experts argued about the degree of passivity or activity in prayer, and when Fenélon, archbishop of Cambrai, was rebuked by his fellow bishops for his support of Madame Guyon and her circle, accused of Quietism, De La Salle was balanced in asserting the importance of prayer both for the individual and for the community.

2.1 "Prayer," says La Salle in the Collection, "is a conversation with God"

These words remind us that prayer is the special way of entering into close relationship with God. The word **conversation** with its linguistic sense of "turning towards" shows how close we are to God and God to us. It reminds us that prayer is not only talking **to** God or talking **with** God. In every respectful conversation, we must also be good listeners to the other. For this to happen, La Salle insists in the *Collection* on the necessity of what he calls interior recollection, that is, a deepening of the awareness of God's presence in ourselves. This is why he will punctuate the school day for both teacher and students with the invocation: "*Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.*" La Salle sees this recalling of God's presence, this interior recollection as he calls it, as a necessity

- *because it recalls the soul to itself;*
- *because it establishes the soul in peace;*
- *because it disposes us to apply ourselves to the presence of God and interior prayer, and gives us facility in doing so.*

For the same reason, La Salle saw meditation, interior prayer, as the "*first and principal*" of the spiritual exercises which were to be carried out every day by the Brothers' community.

2.2 How does La Salle distinguish between vocal prayer and "prayer of the heart?"

In the second part of the 20th Treatise of *The Duties of a Christian* Volume 1, La Salle distinguishes between two types of prayer, the "prayer of the mouth" and the "prayer of the heart." In the first, or vocal prayer, we use the voice and words to honour God and ask him for "what is necessary or helpful for our salvation." He insists that this always remains an important way of praying, especially as a community, citing the example of Jesus, who responds to his disciples' plea: "Lord.

teach us to pray!" by teaching them a vocal prayer, the **Our Father**. La Salle is careful, however, to insist on keeping our hearts close to God during vocal prayer and not simply honouring him with our lips.

In the "prayer of the heart", however, we have the advantage of being able to pray to God at all times simply by the movement of our hearts towards God. It is as natural as breathing. The key to this prayer of the heart is attention to the practice of the *Presence of God* within us as well as honouring God in all those whom we meet, and treating them with respect for God's indwelling. It is this latter idea, for example, which is the governing principle on which La Salle bases his important *Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*. Good manners, insists La Salle, are not simply a convention but rather a way of honouring the presence of God in all those whom we meet. He offers five ways of practising this "prayer of the heart." Because of the many controversies which were prevalent in his time over this question of being "passive" in prayer [remember that this is the century of Quakers in England and the Pilgrim Fathers], La Salle is at great pains to show how these five ways of praying stand in the most ancient Jewish and Christian traditions by showing how Fathers and Doctors of the Church support each one of them:

We can pray to God in our heart in many different ways, but particularly in five ways:

- 1. We can pray to God in **silence**, keeping ourselves simply aware of the Presence of God in sentiments of respect and adoration without expressing anything or asking anything of God. This seems to be the way of praying spoken of by Cassian in his 9th Conference when he says that sometimes in prayer, the Spirit hides himself in us in a profound silence.*
- 2. We can pray also by **thoughts** without making any use of words. This is the kind of prayer of which Saint Chrysostom speaks where the fervour of the Spirit perfects the prayer.*
- 3. We can pray to God also by our **affections** when we ask something of God relying only on the movement of our heart. This, according to Saint Cyprian is how Anna, mother of Samuel, prayed.*
- 4. We can pray to God by our **actions** when they are good with a view to render to God what is due to Him and to obtain from Him some grace.*
- 5. But one of the best ways of praying to God from our hearts is to pray through **sufferings**. This is achieved when we, with the intention of honouring God or of obtaining some spiritual or temporal benefit, support with patience the difficulties which God sends us "*

Silence, thoughts, affections, actions and the acceptance of sufferings are, for La Salle, ways of praying to God in our hearts. None of this may be new, but it is a reminder how La Salle saw prayer as this consistent relationship between the events of our lives and our continuing awareness of the Presence of God. It is this which we find expressed most consistently in the application point - the contact point with our daily lives - in the *Meditations for Sundays and Feasts* and in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*.

3. Why is Meditation, "the first and principal of the daily spiritual practices?"

All prayer for De La Salle begins with the recalling of God's abiding presence. "*Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.*" Notice that the invitation is plural, "*Let US remember.*" This will lead him to insist for his community of Brothers that even such a personal prayer as interior prayer is to take place with all gathered in the chapel or oratory. Before indicating some of the recurring emphases which La Salle seems to have thought of as essential for persons who were to carry out the ministry of Christian education, it is important to recall how La Salle, in his original work, the *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, sees the foundation of such prayer in what he calls *Interior Recollection*, the deepening of the awareness of the *Presence of God*. La Salle offers six ways, among many others which could be invoked, of thinking of God's presence:

- ❑ *God is here because He is everywhere:*
- ❑ *God is here because He has promised to be present "where two or three gather in my name":*
- ❑ *God is present in us to preserve our being and also by grace and the Spirit:*
- ❑ *God is present when we gather in the place, the church or oratory set aside for worship;*
- ❑ *God is present in a special way through the abiding presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.*

This recalling of God's presence has always characterised and continues to characterise the Lasallian school, even where the majority of pupils are not Christian. It has been my privilege to experience this in a number of countries but I share a particular incident which may help to bring it home to you.

In 1989, two Brothers from the General Council were passing through Cairo airport after a meeting in Egypt. In the formalities which preceded their departure, they ran into some difficulties because the visa of one Brother had not been correctly dated, and so caused a back-up in the exit line. A man in the uniform of Air Egypt eventually followed them through once the problem had been solved, and discovering that they were De La Salle Brothers, announced himself as a pupil of one of the long established schools of the Brothers, Saint Marc in Alexandria. Even though this was the fasting month of Ramadan, he insisted on buying them coffee - while abstaining himself - and spoke with great affection of his former teachers. When the Councillors had to answer the call to board their plane, this former pupil said to them:

"Brothers, I wish to tell you one thing I learned from my ten years with the Brothers. I am now the captain of a plane and after I have finished all the checks which are part of my duty as captain, I say to myself as I begin the take-off: *Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of Allah.* And **you**, Brothers, taught me that."

This reminder of God's abiding presence was enshrined most simply and most effectively by De La Salle in the prayer which began or ended most of the daily happenings in the community, the "*Live Jesus in our hearts! Forever.*"

4.1 What is the importance of the invocation "Live Jesus in our hearts! Forever?"

Here is a prayer which forms the bridge between vocal prayer and prayer of the heart for this traditional short prayer which La Salle gave to his community is a constant reminder of God's presence among us in so many ways. It is a prayer for one another, saluting the presence of Jesus in one another. Here we have something original from La Salle, an adaptation perhaps of a prayer of Jean-Jacques Olier from La Salle's seminary days in Saint-Sulpice, an Advent prayer, a contemplation of Mary, pregnant with Jesus:

"Jesus, living in Mary, come and live in me!"

Père Deville, a Sulpician writer with particular understanding of 17th century France, writes of this Lasallian invocation which we address to one another,

It is a living summary of all the teaching on the 'prayer of the heart' which the Founder left to his Brothers. This presence of Jesus in the midst of the Brothers is like the presence of the sun, so that all their actions are directed to Him as to their centre and draw all their sustenance from Him, just as the winestock draws all strength from the vine.

4.2 Why does De La Salle emphasise prayer so much in the Meditations for Sundays & Feasts?

As with so many other writings on the mission of the Christian teacher, De La Salle defines very concisely the essential relationship between prayer and the ministry of Christian education in his meditation for the feast of *Saint Genevieve*, Patroness of Paris. He makes four important points which are relevant to us today:

- ❑ we need to pray because we stand in need of God's grace for ourselves and in order to be able to help others;
- ❑ if we are devoted to prayer, we will succeed in helping others;
- ❑ God alone can give the gifts which we need;
- ❑ we need to pray earnestly for this gift.

It is your duty to apply yourself assiduously and affectionately to prayer in order to draw down on yourself great number of graces which you need in your state, both for your own holiness and helping others to become holy. Be assured that the more you devote yourself to prayer, the more you will also succeed in your work. For, since you are not of yourself able to do anything well for the salvation of souls, you should often turn to God to obtain from him what your profession obliges you to give to others. For it is God, says Saint James, who is the Father of lights and it is from him that every perfect gift comes down. This includes everything that is given and is needed to procure our salvation. Earnestly beg of God this spirit of prayer.

This short citation picks up the most important Lasallian themes of the ministry of Christian education, themes which are repeated throughout the Lasallian writings :

- ❑ The Christian teacher needs God's help to succeed in the ministry of Christian Education. Do you pray for those whom you instruct. Is this how you relate to them? Is this what you ask of God in the prayer you offer to him?" [Meditation 39,1];

- This is something the Christian teacher can achieve only with God's grace since the "God of goodness places [these children] in your hands and undertakes to give them everything you ask of him for them: piety, self-control, reserve, purity the avoidance of companions who could be dangerous to them.....He wants you to ask him for these blessings for them frequently, fervently and insistently." [Meditation 37, 3]
- In so praying, and in so working for others, the Christian teacher is reminded that 'You are mediators for them [children] and God uses you to teach them the way they are to be saved,' [Meditation 56, 3] The minister is helping to attain the salvation of others as well as his/her own.

Another powerful example comes from the 39th meditation for the Eve of the Ascension. Rather than comment on the passage, I draw attention by highlighting certain words and phrases:

Because in your state of life, you are called to bring about the sanctification of your pupils, you should also be holy in no ordinary degree, for you must communicate this holiness to them both by your good example and by the words of salvation which you should address to them every day. Beg him for it daily with great earnestness. Have this so much at heart that you never cease praying for it until you have obtained it.

When he addresses the Brothers about the importance of *Interior Prayer* in the small Book which we call the *Collection*, La Salle recalls this double objective of personal holiness and prayer for our students. Perhaps the most consistent examples of this attitude can be found in the insistence on praying for the grace to be able to "touch hearts."

4.3 The teacher needs to pray for the grace "to touch hearts?"

Winning, or *touching* hearts are all expressions found in the Lasallian meditations: they sum up the essential relationship with pupils for which the Lasallian teacher tries to work. The following citation from the meditation for the feast of Saint Philip Neri is eloquent:

The duty of obtaining grace not only for yourself but also for others and of earning how to touch hearts should make you apply yourself very specially to prayer, for this is the exercise designed for you by God to procure his graces. Is this, then what you have most at heart? Try to perform all your actions in a spirit of prayer, for this is one of the very best ways to sanctify them

4.4 How do we learn "to speak about God" to others?

A very beautiful saying in the Russian Orthodox tradition insists that the one who shares the Gospel with another is like a poor beggar who shows other beggars where good food is to be found. In the three meditations which preceded the Feast of the Ascension, La Salle addresses the prayer of the Christian teacher from different perspectives. In summary, what he is insisting is that no one will be able to speak well

of God and "touch their hearts" unless the one who speaks has **first listened** to God and so learned how to speak about him. The whole of the 64th Meditation reflects this teaching. Here are some of the more striking passages:

- *We learn to speak to God only by listening to him: for to know how to speak to God and to converse with him [remember La Salle's idea of prayer as conversation with God] can only come from God, who has his own language, which is special to him and which he shares only with his friends and confidants, to whom he gives the happiness of frequently conversing with him....*
- *Because you are in charge of instructing children, you should make yourself expert in the art of speaking to God, of speaking about God, and of speaking for God. Be convinced then that you will never speak well to your students and win them over to God except in so far as you have learned well how to speak to him and to speak about him.*

One of the practical ways of trying to speak about God in a way which shows personal integrity and authenticity is by the practice of what has always been called in the Lasallian heritage from the very beginnings, the *Reflection*. The *Reflection* is a privileged occasion when the teacher speaks from the heart to the hearts of the students. It is a short exhortation - not to exceed about three minutes - usually built around a telling quotation or a good story. It is a moment of faith in which the teacher speaks in faith to the faith and (perhaps the doubt!) -of the students. The teacher is prepared to show faith, to share what is personal and valuable, to risk being rejected, in order to offer that glimpse of faith which may attract the timid faith of the other.

5. What are some of the attitudes which La Salle commends for personal prayer?

Although there are specific emphases in certain of his meditations for particular occasions, La Salle often invites us to the following attitudes when we pray.

- being willing to abandon ourselves to God, trying to do what we feel God is asking of us at this particular moment through what we are living;
- placing ourselves in the Presence of God and acting with an awareness of that Presence;
- Recognising God's action [*conduite* = **guidance**] in the events of our lives;
- Seeing things "in the light of faith " as De La Salle insisted. Think of the challenge offered in the Meditation on the feast of the Epiphany where De La Salle, admiring the faith of the Magi who came to worship a king and found themselves looking at a child in the manger, challenges us by saying:

*You too must be prepared to look below **the rags** of the poor children whom you teach and see the Christ-child lying in the manger*

In the *Method of Interior Prayer*, there is an inner dynamic expressed through the three movements which follow the readiness and recollection which make us aware of being travellers on a gospel journey;

- being aware of God's presence and of being called to mission in that presence;
- reflecting on a mystery that Jesus reveals through his life, a virtue which he or a gospel maxim which he formally teaches.
- thanking God for his gifts and resolving to live in a certain way because of the

prayer just made.

6. What are some of the important images or metaphors in Lasallian writings?

In the application points of the Meditations, that is to say, the moment when the reader is asked to consider the relevance of this meditation in a personal way, there are some important images which easily lead to prayer. My purpose, first of all, is simply to list them, and suggest that various ones be investigated through subsequent questions about the particular Meditations. Among the more important we could list:

- ❑ the Good Shepherd;
- ❑ the Sower and the Seed;
- ❑ being Ambassadors and Ministers of Christ:
- ❑ being Fathers and Mothers ;
- ❑ being Intercessors for pupils;
- ❑ being Builders of the Church;
- ❑ being Disciples, "true disciples of Jesus Christ", and Mediators of the New Covenant;
- ❑ faithful Stewards;
- ❑ being like John the Baptist, "Precursors ";
- ❑ being VisibleAngels;
- ❑ being "successors of the Apostles"-
- ❑ "Master Builders".

What is characteristic of these images is that they are usually based on Scripture or on the Lives of the Saints. They invite the reader to follow the path of Christian discipleship in the many and complex ways in which we interact with our students in our daily relationships.

7. How would we characterise Lasallian Prayer?

It is above all the prayer of "busy" people who try to "pray" their way through the many diverse happenings which are defined by our relationship to God in the ministry of teaching through our relationship with those whom we believe we are called to help discover the path of Christian discipleship. It calls us to see everything through the eyes of faith, especially the young people "*confided to our care,*" to be ready to work with a burning zeal "*for their salvation*": it is a prayer which is an indispensable part of our daily lives in all the ways in which we try to establish the Kingdom which Jesus brought in the hearts of the young through the ministry of Christian education.