

59. SIMPLE ATTENTION

(Contemplation)

Summary:

1. The nature of the prayer of simple attention: 1.1. Description of simple attention; 1.2. Simple attention and contemplation; 1.3. The Carmelite influence. – **2.** The predispositions and qualities of simple attention: 2.1. Predispositions; 2.2. Qualities. – **3.** Simple attention as a part of De La Salle's method of prayer: 3.1. The analogy of appreciating art. – **4.** The effects of the practice of simple attention: 4.1. Simple attention and good works; 4.2. Simple attention and the spirit of faith.

1. THE NATURE OF THE PRAYER OF SIMPLE ATTENTION

1.1. De La Salle uses the term simple attention only in *Explication de la Méthode d'oraison*. He describes the prayer of simple attention as follows: "Applying ourselves to the presence of God by simple attention consists in remaining before God with a simple, faith-inspired awareness that He is truly present, and dwelling in this awareness for some time, say ten or fifteen minutes, more or less, as we may feel ourselves interiorly absorbed and attracted" (EM 30).

1.2. De La Salle states that attention is necessary to every prayer (Da 424, 425, 426; Db 251, 252, 302; E 7, 26); but his description of the prayer of simple attention identifies it with contemplation, as that term is used in the tradition of prayer, particularly the Carmelite tradition (DS I, 1064-66; II, 2035-2055). De La Salle himself declares in *Explication de la Méthode d'oraison* that "simple attention is also called contemplation" (EM 72).

He does not use the word contemplation again in that treatise, and he uses it only two other times in his writings (MD 28.2; MF 177.3), possibly to avoid any semblance of quietism.

1.3. De La Salle's understanding and description of simple attention, although derived primarily from his own experience, were certainly influenced by Carmelite spirituality, which, in his time, was greatly affecting almost all the schools of spirituality in Europe (DS II, 2036). His earliest biographers point out that De La Salle made retreats with the discalced Carmelite Priests, and that he had a special devotion to Saint Teresa of Avila, "from whose writings he had imbibed his great spirit of mental prayer" (Blain 2:40, 272, 320, 366, 493; MAR 188-89 see English translation, p. 11). De La Salle would have had access to the works of both John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, since a French translation of Teresa's writings had been published in 1601 (DS 2048), and John's works were published in Paris in 1695 (DS 2054).

2. THE PREDISPOSITIONS AND QUALITIES OF SIMPLE ATTENTION

2.1. De La Salle notes that persons are more disposed to receive the grace of the prayer of simple attention if they are interiorly free, that is, detached from their own desires and pleasures, and make the fulfillment of the will of God the purpose of their life (EM 30-31, 35).

Persons of good will, even though not fully disposed, can become more receptive to the grace of the prayer of simple attention if, during the time of meditation, they receptively and lovingly meditate on a passage of Scripture with a few sustained reflections and without discursive reasoning (EM 29-30).

2.2. The qualities which De La Salle associates with the prayer of simple attention include reverential faith, interior respect, silent worship and adoration, love, admiration, gratitude, thanksgiving, self-abasement, and a heartfelt desire to unite oneself with God and share in God's Spirit (EM 72-3, 99). In the prayer of simple attention, the mind and heart become centered in a state of sustained, loving awareness of the presence of God, without reasoning or discursive thought (EM 34, 99), but simply dwelling, actively and ardently, in a disposition of animated, devout, and affectionate attention (EM 73, 99).

De La Salle's description of the qualities of simple attention calls to mind his description of the spirit of faith in the *Règles communes* (RC 18-20), and *Recueil de différents petits traités* (R 38-50) (spirit of faith).

3. SIMPLE ATTENTION AS PART OF DE LA SALLES'S METHOD OF PRAYER

De La Salle speaks of simple attention as part of his method of prayer and makes it clear that the dynamics of the method will lead anyone faithful to the method to receive, in time and to some degree, the grace of simple attention (EM 29-30).

3.1. De La Salle uses an analogy. As the person who has never studied painting needs at first

to learn by explanations, reasoning, and reflection to recognize a masterpiece and only afterwards can simply gaze in wonder and appreciation at its beauty, so the beginner at prayer needs to go through a similar process to arrive at the prayer of simple attention (EM 31-33).

Thus, in his method of prayer, De La Salle invites beginners to place themselves in the presence of God by using discursive reasoning based on faith, as well as many reflections leavened with affection and tenderness. For those who are progressing in prayer, fewer reflections will be needed and these reflections will be dwelt on for longer periods of time as the need for discursive reasoning diminishes. Finally those who are more advanced will pray with simple attention, which may be sustained by sentiments of affection (EM 73). De La Salle is confident that those who continue the practice of the method of prayer will gradually, even imperceptibly, be graced, at least to some degree, with the practice of simple attention and will finally dwell with contentment and delight in the simple awareness of the presence of God (EM 30, 34).

During the prayer of simple attention a person dwells primarily in the respectful and receptive awareness of God's presence (EM 30, 31-2, 34). But simple attention can also be directed to a mystery of faith (the Incarnation or the Passion, for example (EM 60), to a specific occasion in the life of the Lord as he teaches a virtue (EM 96, 99), or to the truth of a maxim of Scripture (EM 113).

4. THE EFFECTS OF THE PRACTICE OF SIMPLE ATTENTION

The effects of simple attention include detachment from created things, interior consolation, a relationship of complete intimacy with God, a facility in doing good and in the practice of virtue, a deepening of prayer, and a continued awareness of the presence of God (EM 34-35, 99-100).

4.1. According to De La Salle the purpose of prayer, including the prayer of simple attention, is both the conversion of heart and the practice of good works. His method of prayer includes the formulation of practical resolutions for the practice of virtue (EM 80). However, when he speaks

about the results of simple attention he notes that the gentle attraction to do good works and to practice virtue flows directly from the prayer of simple attention itself without formal resolutions (EM 99-100).

De La Salle declares that simple attention attracts the heart gently but effectively to the practice of virtue and produces a strong and supernatural affection for good, even in the face of difficulties and repugnances. The practice of virtue that results from the prayer of simple attention is, then, less the effect of a personal resolution consciously added to prayer than it is the result of the detachment from created things and the attraction to good, sentiments that are aroused in the heart by the experience of simple attention itself.

4.2. For De La Salle, prayer in all of its various forms nurtures the spirit of faith, but the prayer of simple attention is related to the spirit of faith in a special way. The characteristics which De La Salle uses to describe simple attention and its effects are so similar to those which he also uses to describe the spirit of faith, that simple attention and the spirit of faith appear to be identical faith stances before God. The practice of simple attention during the time of prayer and the practice of the spirit of faith in the ordinary experiences of life not only nurture one another, but can be considered the same practice. Simple attention centers the person in the presence of God during the time of prayer with the same faith-inspired awareness and the same intimate union of wills as the spirit of faith does in the ordinary experiences of life (EM 30-35, 60, 72-73, 99-100; R 38-50).

Complementary themes:

Conversion; Consolation; Detachment; Glory of God; Maxims of the Gospel; Mental prayer; Mystery; Prayer; Presence of God; Scripture; Spirit of faith; Spirit of the world; Will of God; Zeal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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MAR 188-189 is available in English: Dom Elie MAILLEFER, *The life of John Baptist De La Salle*, 1963, pages 110-111.

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