

LASALLIAN PRAYER IS AFFECTIVE PRAYER

I would like to make this clear with the help of a page from tome II of "A Christian's Duties to God." The first edition of this treatise goes back to 1703 and we know the sources from which de La Salle drew: "A Christian's Duty in the form of a catechism" by the bishop of Agen, Claude Joly, and "Theology of a Christian and his principal Duties" by a little known seventeenth century missionary, Jean le Coreur. The text quoted below is obviously taken from the latter.

It is interesting to place the two texts side by side.

Text of J.B. de La Salle

Q. *In how many ways can we pray to God mentally or from the heart?*

A. In five ways: 1) by silence, 2) by thought, 3) by affection, 4) by action, 5) by suffering.

Q. *How do we pray by silence?*

A. By placing ourselves in the presence of God in a sentiment of respect and adoration, acknowledging our weakness and needs without asking to be delivered from them. This is what beggars often do. They are content to show their wounds and their poverty without asking anything from passers by in the hope of moving them to compassion.

Q. *How do we pray by thought?*

A. By paying homage to God and acknowledging our needs without words.

Q. *How do we pray by affection?*

A. By showing God, more by our feelings than by our reason, the love we have for Him and our desire to receive His graces.

Q. *How do we pray by our actions?*

A. By doing good for the love of God in order to pay Him homage and to obtain from Him the graces we need.

Q. *How do we pray by suffering?*

A. By bearing with Christian patience all the pain and suffering it may please God to send us in this life in order to pay Him homage and to obtain the graces we need.

Text of Jean le Coreur

Q. *In how many different ways can we pray to God?*

A. Five. The first by thought, the second by word, the third by silence, the fourth by action, the fifth by suffering.

Q. *How do we pray by silence?*

A. By showing God our misery as we place ourselves in his presence without asking to be delivered, just as beggars do who are content to show their poverty and wounds to passers by in the hope of moving them to compassion.

Q. *How do we pray by thought?*

A. By offering to God with love the desires of our hearts, in our thoughts alone without the use of words.

Q. *How do we pray by our actions?*

A. By doing good works inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Q. *How do we pray by suffering?*

A. By bearing with Christian patience all the afflictions that God sends us in this life.

"A Christian's Duties to God" was composed by St. John Baptist de La Salle between 1695 and 1698. The complete work is in three volumes. The above extract is taken from volume II (C.L. 21 pp. 261 to 263).

Since de La Salle is thinking only of mental prayer in this context he omits Le Coreur's question on vocal prayer but adds another. It is precisely this last question which speaks of prayer of affection.

In this manner of praying, more by movement of the heart than by the thoughts of the mind, de La Salle expresses a basic principle of his own prayer, at least to the extent that his writings reveal it. For him prayer is total: it involves the whole person. In terms of the anthropology of the seventeenth century this means the mind, heart and soul. It involves the whole person because, by its nature, it springs from the most intimate depths of his being. After defining mental prayer in the "Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer," as an interior occupation, that is, an application of the soul to God, he continues,

"It is called interior because it is not simply an occupation of the mind but of all the powers of the soul. To be pure and strong it must come from the depths of the soul, from its most intimate depths. If prayer involved only the mind or the superficial emotions it would be subject to worldly and emotional distractions which would render it fruitless. Unless this prayer of the mind penetrated the soul it would be merely a series of passing thoughts which left the soul in a state of aridity and bereft of God."

It is clear that affective does not mean emotional, much less sentimental. It is a love marked by strong, even vehement desires. It is a love of togetherness, of union, of communion, of commitment. It is sustained attention to the gifts received as can be seen from the beautiful prayer after Holy Communion taken from "Instructions and Prayers." Is the saint not here talking of himself?

"What a great honour it is for man to talk intimately to his God, his Lord and Sovereign, as Moses, that faithful leader of his people, did and as we can do every day in prayer!"

"But it is a greater gift and an inexpressible happiness to possess in oneself this same God and to be able to talk to Him of one's salvation, heart to heart, as to a friend and to ask Him for the graces one needs."

"This is the advantage I have in Holy Communion, for having Jesus Christ in my soul I find there a God who treats me as a friend, who shares my interests and who seeks only the good of my soul. Sometimes He communicates to me his interior dispositions, sometimes He shares with me his views and the intentions He had in his actions which were done purely for the glory of his Father. Now He inspires me to do something for God, another time He urges me to commit myself entirely to his service. Sometimes He reminds me of what He did and suffered to save me; at other times He reveals to me the assiduity and continuity of his prayers to the Father and his desire for my complete conversion.

Grant, O my Jesus that all the inspirations you give me may be engraved on my heart never to be erased and that they may produce in me all the effects you desire."

John Baptist de La Salle gave a beautiful definition of "affective prayer" in "A Christian's Duties to God." It is, if I may say so, wonderfully illustrated in that prayer. You find in it the attitudes towards prayer of the true disciple of Jesus Christ, who has become His friend and the confidant of the secrets of his heart.

By asserting, in his catechetical manual, that there is a way of praying "by affection" St. John Baptist de La Salle wished to show that something essential is involved..

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(1) "A Christian's Duties to God" was composed by de La Salle between 1695-1698. The complete work is in three volumes. The extract given here is taken from the second. (C.L. 21. p. 261-263).

(2) Cahier Lasallien, n. 14, p. 3.

(3) Cahier Lasallien, n. 17, p. 275.