

LASALLIAN EDUCATORS: MEN AND WOMEN OF PRAYER

Throughout the Lasallian world today the emphasis on creating schools that are authentically Lasallian is striking. In many places, Brothers, lay teachers, parents, former students, associates, and the students themselves are reflecting together on the meaning of Lasallian education and are working together to effect genuine renewal of their schools.

We are beginning to see, for example, Lasallian *Days*, workshops, and retreats, together with productive efforts at building educative communities that are faith-filled, person-centered, committed to excellence in teaching, creative, zealous for the religious growth of the students, concerned for the poor and for justice and peace.

What is most encouraging in this movement of renewal is the desire of many members of the Lasallian Family to participate not only in the educational objectives of the Institute, but also in the spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. There is a growing realization that the Lasallian Family of Brothers, lay teachers, parents, former students, associates, and students, united in the vision and spirit of the Founder, could be a highly effective instrument in the mission of Christian education today.

IDENTITY AND PRAYER

This introduction might seem a bit long in a short article entitled "*Lasallian Educators: Men and Women of Prayer*". But in fact, what has been said is fundamental to understanding De La Salle's teaching on prayer. For our Founder, there is an inseparable link between the identity of the Brother (and, by extension, all members of the Lasallian Family) and a regular pattern of personal prayer.

For De La Salle the Brothers' vocation is to respond to the needs of the young as ministers of the Lord, as his *ambassadors* and *co-workers*. The Brother is to *re-present* Jesus Christ, making his loving and saving presence a visible and effective reality among young people. Logically, then, De La Salle can say: "Hence, since the object of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is to educate children in the spirit of Christianity, and to endeavor to procure them that spirit, it is of the utmost importance that the Brothers be... imbued... and abundantly filled with the Spirit of faith." (Collection)

De La Salle's meaning is clear: we cannot give what we do not have. The Lasallian educator must be a man or woman of faith, that is to say, a person in a living, conscious, dynamic relationship with God. It is in this context that we can understand the Founder's insistence on the necessity of regular personal prayer. It is prayer that nurtures this close relationship with the Lord: "The principal occupation" in personal prayer is *to be filled with God and united interiorly to him.*" (*Explanation of the Mental Prayer: EMMP*). We can now understand why De La Salle insisted that the Brothers should have a great love for personal prayer and should look upon it as the first and principal of their daily exercises.

It is not possible in this short article to consider in depth our Founder's teaching on prayer. What we can do, however, is reflect briefly on some of the most fundamental orientations. The first we have just seen:

1) The necessity for regular personal prayer in the life of the Lasallian educator springs from his or her identity as minister of the Lord.

THE WORD OF GOD

Closely related to a commitment to regular prayer is a love for the scriptures. De La Salle considers the scriptures the first Rule of the Institute. "The scriptures," he says, "must *be eaten* by all true servants of God, that they may subsequently be able to communicate and explain their secrets to those whom they are called upon to instruct." (*Meditation 170*).

De La Salle taught the Brothers to meditate on the scriptures daily, allowing the *Word of God* to penetrate their minds and hearts. He taught them to move from reflection to ardent conversation with the Lord.

For the Lasallian educator, therefore, the habit of reading and meditating upon the scriptures is of primary importance. Our second orientation, then, can be expressed as follows:

2) The Lasallian educator devotes some minutes every day to prayerful reflection on the *Word of God*.

PERSONAL ENCOUNTER WITH THE LORD

Another fundamental orientation of De La Salle is that prayer is a personal encounter with the Lord at the center of our being. He doesn't use those precise words. His language is the language of his day: "Mental prayer is an interior occupation, that is to say, an application of the soul to God... It is not only an exercise of the intellect but also brings into action all the powers of the soul... its operations must take place in the inner recesses of the soul." (EMMP).

Dated language, yes, but the meaning is clear. The Lasallian educator should meet the Lord daily at the center of his being. Prayer is more than a period of reflection on God, or on some doctrine, teaching, or idea. "The first things which we should do in mental prayer," he says, "is to penetrate ourselves interiorly with the presence of God." (EMMP) To make sure that the novices did not spend too much time in "thinking about" God, De La Salle insisted that they converse with the Lord. To help them sustain this conversation, he suggested they follow a series of *acts*.

The Founder said that beginners would normally use many words in their conversation with the Lord, but that those more experienced should use *fewer words* or even no words and *remain for some time in an interior silence.*" (EMMP)

The heart of De La Salle's teaching is that prayer is a period of heightened awareness of the Lord's presence in our life. It is a time for conscious personal encounter with the Lord in the depths of our being. At times we might want to converse with many words. At other times with few words and more silence. And there may be times when we are quite content to remain before the Lord in a loving attentive silence. Our third orientation is this:

3) The Lasallian educator, convinced that to *render present* Jesus Christ, regular contact with him is required, makes it a personal rule to encounter the Lord in prayer every day.

LIFE'S EXPERIENCES AND PRAYER

Let us consider one more basic orientation of De La Salle: the link between our daily experiences and our prayer. For De La Salle prayer was never an escape from everyday realities. On the contrary. He urges the Brothers to see the relationship between their prayer life and their daily service of youth. They should bring their experiences to the Lord. He tells them to intercede for those "*confided to your care.*" "When you encounter some difficulty in the guidance of your disciples when there are some who do not profit from your teaching and you observe a reckless spirit in them turn to God with confidence. Earnestly ask Jesus Christ to make his Spirit come alive in you, since he has chosen you to do his work." (*Meditation* 196)

De La Salle trained his novices to make a conscious link between their daily experiences and their prayer by concluding their reflection and conversation with the Lord with a practical daily resolution. Brothers more experienced he advised to "leave meditation with a renewed desire to discharge your duties well." (EMMP) The orientation is clear. We can formulate it thus:

4) The Lasallian educator comes into the presence of God fully alive. There he or she reflects on life's daily experiences, converses with the Lord about them, and renews his or her intention to serve him with greater fidelity.

ZEAL AND PRAYER

"Your zeal must go so far that you are ready to give your very life, so dear to you are the children confided to your care." (*Meditation* 198)

The same De La Salle who made that remarkable statement is the same De La Salle who exhorted his Brothers *to have a great love for the holy exercise of Mental Prayer.* (Rule). He was convinced that only persons of prayer could be truly Christian and effective ministers of youth. That is why he urged the Brothers to make the scriptures central to their life and to bring themselves into the presence of God daily, encountering him in the depths of their heart.

Those of us who wish to live the Lasallian spirit would do well to take to heart these words: "As you are under the obligation of obtaining graces not only for yourself but likewise for others, and also of acquiring the gift of touching hearts, you ought to apply yourself in a special manner to the practice of mental prayer, for this is precisely the exercise which God has provided you with for the purpose of obtaining his graces." (*Meditation* 129)

Brother John JOHNSTON
Vicar General
ROME