

**MENTAL PRAYER  
OF SIMPLE ATTENTION IN  
ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE  
AND COMTEMPLATION IN  
ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS  
(1/3)**

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**Introduction.**

St. John Baptist de La Salle, founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and special patron of educators of youth, is not well known as a spiritual writer. He is acknowledged and has his place as a pioneer in the history of education, but in studies of spirituality and as a writer on spiritual subjects he remains neglected. It might seem strange that a Saint should be well known for his humanitarian work, whilst his spiritual contribution remains in oblivion.

I do not intend investigating possible reasons for this oversight; I would prefer to concentrate on presenting one aspect which will suggest his rightful place in spiritual teaching. I mean to deal with the subject of "mental prayer of simple attention" as understood by St. John Baptist de La Salle. I shall then summarise what St. John of the Cross says about contemplation in "Llama de Amor viva" (The burning fire of love), 3, 27-67. Although it is difficult to give exact quotations as proof, there do exist signs of affinity between the two Saints. I shall begin with mental prayer of "simple attention".

**1. Mental prayer of Simple attention in  
St. John Baptist de La Salle.**

*(In this first part, numbers in parentheses refer to "Cahier Lasallien" n° 50; cf bibliography at the end)*

**1. Writings on Mental Prayer.**

We find De La Salle's doctrine on Mental Prayer throughout the texts of "Duties of a Christian", "Meditations", and "Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer". The latter is not well known outside the Brothers' congregation, nor within it, to tell the truth, in spite of Novitiates including it in their programmes, for it seems that the Brothers doubt De La Salle's efficacy as a teacher of mental prayer. The volume which has given most noteworthy mention of De La Salle in this connection is Cardinal Lercaro's "Methods of Mental Prayer", whose chapter 7 is a discussion of De La Salle's method.

**2. His formation and his ministry.**

De La Salle was the eldest son of a well-to-do family of Rheims; he made part of his preparations for the priesthood in Rheims University and the rest at the Sorbonne. His one and a half years at the latter place left an indelible mark on his personality and spirituality. His involvement in establishing schools came about by accident, so to speak, and the teachers he trained later, in 1680, formed the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. He was greatly influenced by the French school of spirituality, and had considerable trouble from advocates of Jansenism and Quietism.

**3. The French school of spirituality.**

It is not yet fully established whether De La Salle really belonged to the so-called French school of spirituality. In Saturnino Gallego's book mentioned in the bibliography, we are assured that he was not; Lercaro asserts the opposite. Of course one cannot study his writings without considering his social setting, so no matter how original De La Salle might have been, he was certainly influenced by writers of his own and previous times.

According to Lercaro "his method of mental prayer, though maintaining its originality, is quite similar to the method used at St. Sulpice, especially in its second part. The most original part is the first, which he calls recollection". Immediate preparation is for De La Salle certainly the essential aspect of meditation, and can be a complete mental prayer in itself; it is a series of acts, which the author explains thoroughly and which he considers of vital importance.

This first part deals with the presence of God; it is here that we find his doctrine on "simple attention", which I shall explain shortly.

**4. Quietism and its problems.**

De La Salle was perhaps influenced by that mental prayer generally known as "mental prayer of simple regard, the simple presence of God", which unfortunately acquired a bad name by being patronised by the Quietists. Nevertheless it is valuable for union with God and spiritual progress when used after sufficient preparation.

It is for those well prepared that De La Salle advocates it, but not without certain warnings.

De La Salle has composed quite an elaborate method of mental prayer, which begins in its first part by putting oneself in God's presence; this can be done in any one of three ways: God's presence as felt within ourselves, God everywhere and God in church. Each of these ways is divided into two aspects, thus making six ways in all. There are nine acts of this first part. Once one has centred one's thoughts, one can consider the mysteries of Christ, his virtues or his teaching, which constitutes the second part, or the heart, of mental prayer.

**5. "L'Oraison",  
(mental prayer, meditation, contemplation).**

De La Salle's definition of Oraison is "an application of the soul to God". This is not just something taking place in the mind, though he does call it at times "oraison mentale", but it involves all aspects of the soul. It is prayer taking place in the depth of the soul, its most secret part. When prayer is really interior, the chief objective of the soul is to enjoy a kind

of apprenticeship, through faith, of the pleasures of eternity. (6)

The first thing to do is to be interiorly penetrated by the presence of God: this is always done through faith founded on a passage of Holy Scripture (14).

## **6. Putting oneself in the Presence of God.**

In considering each way of realising God's presence, De La Salle uses a passage of Scripture. The choice of the passage will result in such advantages as recollection, avoidance of offending God and gaining confidence in God. From these advantages arise an affectionate attitude, which means a feeling towards God based on the passages used. De La Salle then gives samples of prayers. The results and "expressions of affection" - called "affections" in French - are related to the way one has realised God's presence and on the selected quotations from Scripture. (39-47).

In chapter three, De La Salle speaks of the different ways of concentrating on God's presence. He explains how to show God the feelings based on the scripture passage chosen. This manner of concentrating on God's presence through passages of Scripture can be achieved by many different reflections, or through short, prolonged reflections, or by simple attention. (99-121).

### **6.1 By many different reflections.**

We are first given examples of how to concentrate on God by means of reflections which form a conversation with God. This is useful for a time, but De La Salle then says "this way of concentrating on God is useful for only a certain period...because it achieves its purpose by means of reasoning and countless reflections, and these, when one is considering the truths of faith, obscure understanding rather than enlighten it, close it instead of opening it and keep God at a distance, instead of helping one to approach him, even when these reasonings and reflections are founded and supported by attitudes of faith" (87).

### **6.2 By short, prolonged reflections. (87)**

An easier way of concentrating on God's presence is the interior one of fixing one's mind on a extract from Scripture which will recall God's presence. One then makes some reflections on the text, without however using too much intellectual effort, because the intellect destroys, or at least obstructs or prevents faith from being as strong as it might be, or from being engraved on one's mind and heart. One should stay with this attitude as long as one can, with the **simplest**, and **liveliest form of attention** on the passage chosen. This does not require much intellectual effort.

As soon as one finds that the quotation no longer holds one's attention, one should chose another. In this way by paying attention to some quotation concerning the faith, added to reflection on it, one can gradually manage to concentrate on God's presence by **simple attention**.

This way of placing oneself in God's presence can be called, not the method of simple attention, but of attention interspersed with a few reflections.

### **6.3 Mental prayer of simple attention (94-121)**

This consists in being in God's presence simply by looking at him in an interior way through faith in that presence, and by remaining in the same attitude for some time, perhaps five or six minutes or about quarter of an hour, depending on how one feels attracted interiorly to it.

Some people are so blessed, that they are worry-free and uninterested in created things; they therefore rarely, even almost never, lose God's presence: the state of such persons offers a foretaste of heaven's happiness.

#### **Conditions for this state.**

To experience the grace just described, one must have been free from sin throughout one's life, have kept faithful to God for a long period, have been pardoned not only of one's sins, but of even the slightest results of them, have resisted one's first impulses, have shunned the whims of the senses or the mind, or have avoided retaining one's own willfulness and replaced it by God's will operating in one's soul.

People like the above can repeat St. Paul's words that it is not they who live but Christ who lives in them.

For one who has been making mental prayer for a long time and is used to recalling God's presence, it is quite sufficient to keep **simply recollected**, and to remember that one is in God's presence, then one will remain calm and concentrated in thought. (115).

#### **Results**

This simple attention gives a person an interior happiness and joy in the process of concentrating in this way, without needing to make other reflections or considerations.

This simple attention helps one to forget everything created.

By simple attention one acquires a clearer knowledge and more intimate relationship with God and his attributes.

It is a short cut towards doing good, praying, concentrating the mind on God's presence.

It also banishes quite a few problems. (119).

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