

THROUGH ABSTINENCE AND PRAYER HE LEARNED FROM GOD WHAT HE WANTED OF HIM

Prayer, a key element in the life of the Founder

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Introduction

The year 1995 has been dedicated by the Brothers throughout the world as a Year of Prayer.

Prayer is the basis of religious life, an expression of the attitude of mind and of the zeal and virtue that the Founder repeatedly called the Brothers to develop. Prayer, however, is also the basis of a life of faith, following the example of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

This article attempts to outline and to study some examples of prayer in the Founder's life, to encourage reflection on the various methods of praying, and to open up to ourselves today the life of prayer.

1. A collection of references from the Founder's life, for our personal meditation

This series of events and references is adapted from the biography of the Founder, *The Work Is Yours*, by Brother Luke Salm; other biographies of De La Salle, especially that by Blain, contain similar accounts. This present selection of items makes no claim to being comprehensive.

1. His duties as a young canon, included, above all, the public prayer of the Church, especially the daily chanting of the Liturgy of the Hours in the cathedral choir and the Eucharist with the cathedral chapter.
2. Among the elements in the extremely strict discipline of the seminary of Saint Sulpice were, for example, early retiring (after evening-prayer at eight o'clock) and early rising (at five o'clock). There were the ordinary spiritual exercises, such as vocal prayer, meditation, daily Mass, and the Office, on the one hand, and in addition, the obligation of the rosary and spiritual reading.
3. At the outset of 1676, when he was still a subdeacon, De La Salle thought of exchanging his canonry for a parish. It was agreed that the pastor of Saint Pierre, André Cloquet, would resign, in order to devote himself to prayer and study. Nicolas Roland, De La Salle's spiritual director, was of the opinion that this would be an opportunity for his young protegee to experience a more direct, apostolic ministry.
4. While John Baptist was trying to discern which road God intended him to follow, he consulted a number of persons. Their recommendations made a profound impression on John Baptist. After lengthy, thorough meditation, De La

Salle began to examine the contradictions, to engage in extended contemplation of that gospel to which his life seemed so completely opposite. He prayed very long, often the whole night through, in order to discover God's will.

5. To prayer he added fasting and corporal penance. In the subsequent crises that afflicted him throughout his entire life, he always acted in the same manner.

6. In his pattern of living with the initial young men who entered the community in Reims, they prayed daily with great devotion the Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Additionally, there was an hour of spiritual reading in the morning and in the evening, as well as additional time for meditation.

7. When difficulties arose, De La Salle customarily remained serene and took refuge in more intensive prayer. Moreover, he increased his physical penances in order to seek heaven's help.

8. The biographers state that these mortifications were regarded as a supplement and were a support of the regular life of prayer that was practiced in all of the communities.

9. When the pastor of Saint Sulpice took steps to change the habit of the Brothers, the Founder took refuge in prayer and sought advice from his friends. Fortunately, his spiritual guide from an earlier period at Saint Sulpice was forthright in his advice. He counselled De La Salle to persevere in his point of view.

10. In describing De La Salle's first illness, the biographers point out that the excess of work, the stress and worry because of continuing opposition, the many hours of prayer, the severe mortification, and the strict, austere life-style had exhausted his strength.

11. When it was a question of deciding about items in the Rule, De La Salle did not want to make decisions by himself; therefore, he wrote to the principal Brothers and asked them to consider these questions carefully and to look for the answer in prayer.

12. In 1694, when De La Salle proposed to the Brothers that they elect one of their own as superior, they agreed to proceed to a vote, but then they unanimously elected De La Salle. Perplexed and even a little annoyed over this result, he requested the Brothers to pray for a long time before holding a second ballot.

13. The biographers, at a certain point, note that the community of Brothers and the schools were flourishing and that

life in Vaugirard was proceeding as before, with prayer, mortification, and many privations.

14. During the time that Vaugirard still had no chapel, the Brothers only had a room to use as an oratory.

15. When the bishop of Chartres suggested changing certain of the Brothers' teaching methods, De La Salle opposed him. The biographers state that De La Salle did not reach this decision hastily. He had not only considered these methods at great length and in concentrated prayer, but he subsequently wrote down his reasons, summarizing them in ten points.

16. When considering whether to use his own inheritance to endow the schools, De La Salle intensified within himself the following prayer to God: "If you, O God, support the schools, they will be richly endowed; if You do not do so, however, they will lack any kind of foundation. I beg You, let me know Your will."

17. When the Brothers were about to take charge of the school in Paris, in the rue Princesse, they didn't take long to observe that the school had fallen into total chaos. The students came and went as they wished. There was no appointed timetable for the classes, no organized religion lesson, and no prayer at the beginning of the lesson.

18. The daily religion lesson and prayer were essential elements of the schedule in the Brothers' schools.

19. The future schoolteachers being prepared by the Brothers for work in the countryside followed, in general, the same schedule as in Reims. They retained their secular dress, but in everything else they oriented themselves to the Brothers' routine: early rising, prolonged periods of prayer and spiritual reading, practice lessons, and pedagogical training.

20. The Brothers who were the first to go to Rouen were assigned the task of waking up the residents of the hospice in the morning and of seeing to it that they got dressed and said their prayers; only then could they go to the school.

21. De La Salle greatly loved the solitude and the opportunity for extended periods of prayer that he found at Saint Yon, even though he had plenty of administrative work to do because of the rapid growth of his Institute.

22. The established practice in the early Society required that all of the Brothers write to De La Salle monthly about their conduct in the school and the community, their prayer life, and their interior dispositions.

23. On one occasion when he was urged to dismiss a Brother, instead, according to one witness, he spent the entire night in prayer and decided that the Brother should remain.

24. The biographers state repeatedly that John Baptist sought to fathom the will of God in solitude and in prayer.

25. In the meantime, during his two-month sojourn in the South of France he devoted himself in total seclusion to prayer and contemplation, far removed from the Brothers and still in doubt about what God intended for him.

26. In the place where he stayed in Grenoble there was a courtyard where one could climb a stone staircase to the upper floor; here a narrow stairway led to an isolated cell in a private corner of the tower where the Founder chose to live, working in silence and prayer on the revision of his writings, especially *The Duties of a Christian*.

27. The Founder remained isolated in Grenoble during the long winter of 1713-1714 and devoted himself to prayer and to the revision of his writings for the schools and the Brothers. Over time, the long hours of work and prayer in the drafty space at the top of the tower weakened his health.

28. The news of De La Salle's declining health worried the people of Grenoble, and everyone prayed for his convalescence, especially his priest friends, Yse de Saléon and Claude Canel.

29. Both clergyman organized public prayers in order to storm heaven urgently for assistance.

30. A visionary - as Sister Louise was known - lived in the region; her advice was sought by many because of her unstinting prayer and the clarity of her spiritual vision.

31. In fact, in moving from Paris to Rouen, the Founder had hoped to be able to spend his days at Saint Yon in solitude and prayer, and at the same time to help as much as possible with the training of the novices, but he saw himself constantly in demand and engaged as confessor or spiritual director of his Brothers.

32. After two days of prayer and preparation, the General Chapter of 1717 proceeded without difficulty to the election of the Superior General.

33. In a word, seclusion, prayer, love of neighbor, humility, self-denial and a strict life of poverty seemed to bring De La Salle special joy in his retirement.

34. Every day the Founder practiced with the novices the different methods of prayer. Each novice recited his prayer aloud; De La Salle pointed out shortcomings in their method and suggested improvements. Thus he guided the novices so that they learned to pray personally and for a prolonged period. From this teaching experience De La Salle developed his treatise about prayer, entitled *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*.

35. When John Baptist was at the point of death, they offered him the last rites. In full possession of his spiritual powers, he answered the prayers, and once the ritual was completed, he remained several hours in prayer of thanksgiving.

36. On April 6, 1719, towards evening, as he began to speak incoherently and also to lose consciousness, the Brothers gathered for the prayers of the dying.

37. On Good Friday, April 7, at two-thirty in the morning, he returned briefly to consciousness and repeated a prayer offered by one of the Brothers, the final verse of the *Maria Mater gratiae*: Mary, mother of mercy, be with us in the hour of our death.

38. When Brother Barthélemy asked him if he accepted his agony, he answered, "Yes, I adore in all things the will of God in my regard."

39. Furthermore, he left the Brothers this important advice: remain faithful to the Roman Church, preserve your love for prayer and for the Holy Eucharist, be zealous and magnanimous in your service, and obey your superiors for the good of the community.

2. Analysis of these passages

The above texts referring to the life of De La Salle can be divided into four groups:

1. The public prayer of the Church in which De La Salle participated.
2. Private and public prayer of various persons connected with De La Salle.
3. Spiritual exercises and customs of the Founder and the Brothers.
4. Personal prayer of De La Salle.

1. Public prayer.

* The Divine Office:

The recitation or chanting of the Divine Office in the cathedral was an important duty of a canon to fulfill.

* School prayer:

Obviously, before the Brothers in Paris took charge of the classes, there was no organized religion lesson given, nor was there prayer before the lesson.

This quickly changed, however, so that the daily religion lesson and school prayer became integral parts of the typical day in a Christian school of De La Salle.

Also, in the Rouen Hospice the Brothers had the task of bringing the residents to prayer after they had them rise and get dressed.

* Prayer services:

Both his priest friends in Grenoble, Yse de Saléon and Claude Canel, Canons of Saint-André, had once organized prayer services to bring the Brothers to Grenoble. Now they conducted public prayer services for De La Salle's convalescence. After a painful seizure of rheumatism, he again had to undergo a disagreeable cure, which finally was effective.

2. Prayer of various other persons.

* Devotion to prayer:

Père André Clocquet, pastor of Saint Pierre in Reims, wanted to go on retreat at the outset of the year 1676 and devote himself entirely to prayer and study. De La Salle, although only a subdeacon, upon the advice of his spiritual director, Nicolas Roland, decided to take his place. The archbishop, however, ordered him to forsake the proposal. Later, De La Salle admitted that he had heard an interior voice to the effect that God did not want him to be a parish pastor.

* Prayer and the daily schedule:

In 1699 a teacher-training center for country schoolmasters was established in Saint-Hypolite parish on the outskirts of Paris. Brother Nicolas Vuyart was entrusted with its management. The teacher candidates adapted themselves to the routine of the Brothers: early rising and long periods for prayer and spiritual reading.

* Prayer services:

Both his priest friends in Grenoble conducted public prayer services so that the people could pray for De La Salle's return to good health. For years the population preserved the memory of the eagerness with which John Baptist instructed the children and how he guided them to the neighboring church where he celebrated Mass with them.

* The prayer of Sister Louise at Parménie:

De Saléon came regularly as spiritual advisor to Parménie. He urged De La Salle to spend some time recovering his health in this hermitage not far from Grenoble. De La Salle at this time held a number of conversations with Sister

Louise; many sought her advice because of her unceasing prayer and the clarity of her spiritual vision.

3. Spiritual exercises and ceremonies.

* Daily schedule:

The discipline that John Baptist had experienced in the seminary of Saint Sulpice was extremely strict: early to bed and early to rise. The daily spiritual exercises included vocal prayer, meditation, holy Mass, the rosary, and spiritual reading.

The Brothers adopted a similar schedule. In the novitiate they prayed additionally and recited meditatively the Office of the Blessed Virgin, and they allocated more time for spiritual reading and meditation.

To the ordinary exercises of prayer they often added mortification and privation.

Also, the schedule for the prospective country schoolmasters was based on that of the Brothers.

* Election of the Superior:

Before important elections De La Salle invited the Brothers to engage in a long period of prayer.

The election of Brother Barthélemy was preceded by two days of prayer.

* Letters:

In their monthly letters to De La Salle, the Brothers also reported on their prayer life.

* Learning to pray:

De La Salle taught the novices the different methods of prayer; he pointed out shortcomings and suggested improvements. In this way the Brothers learned to pray personally and over a longer period. From this teaching experience De La Salle developed his *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*.

* Prayer at the moment of death:

De La Salle prayed with the Brothers during the last anointing and subsequently spent several hours in the prayer of thanksgiving. The Brothers recited together the prayers for the dying.

4. De La Salle and his personal prayer.

* Prayer at night:

He prayed at great length, often throughout the night, in order to recognize God's will. After such a night of prayer, he would make his decision.

* Prayer, fasting and penance:

To prayer he added fasting and physical penance.

When matters were urgent, De La Salle took refuge in more intensive prayer; in addition he multiplied his physical penances.

These mortifications were regarded as a supplement and as a support of the regular prayer life of the community.

The severe corporal penance and the strict lifestyle exhausted his strength.

* Prayer and consultation:

De La Salle took refuge in prayer and looked for guidance from his friends and his spiritual director.

Daily he practiced with the novices the different methods of prayer; he so guided them that they learned to pray personally and for a long period.

* Answers to prayer:

De La Salle, while formulating the Rule, invited the Broth-

ers to consider the request carefully and to seek the answer in prayer. He would think about a matter for a long time and in prayer.

Thereby he sought to discern the will of God in solitude and prayer.

His final words were, in effect, "Yes, I pray in all things to know the will God in my regard."

He retained his love for prayer and for the Holy Eucharist, and he recommended the same to the Brothers.

*** Prayer and solitude:**

He loved the solitude and the opportunities for extended periods of prayer that he found at Saint Yon.

He tried to fathom the will God in solitude and in prayer.

During the two months of his sojourn in the South of France, he devoted himself in solitude to prayer and meditation.

In Grenoble he wanted to remain in silence and prayer and to work on the revision of his writings.

Seclusion, prayer, humility, self-denial and a strict life of poverty seemed to bring him special joy.

*** Prayer and his work on his writings:**

When the problem arose in Chartres, he reflected on the matter and prayed; he subsequently wrote down his reasons and summarized them in ten points.

In Grenoble he wanted to work in silence and in prayer on the revision of his writings, especially *The Duties of a Christian*.

He devoted himself to prayer and to revising his writings for the schools and for the Brothers.

Through teaching the novices about the different methods of prayer, De La Salle developed his own treatise on prayer, *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*.

*** Personal prayer of De La Salle:**

When considering whether to use his own inheritance to endow the schools, De La Salle intensified within himself the following prayer to God: "If you, O God, support the schools, they will be richly endowed; if You do not do so, however, they will lack any kind of foundation. I beg You, let me know Your will."

In his final testament he stated, "I recommend that you remain closely associated and in complete submission."

"If contradiction is a proof that the enterprise comes from God, lets us be happy. Our Institute is truly His work. The cross that follows us everywhere is our certain guarantee."

"I will speak often with the words of the prophet Habakuk: Domine opus tuum- Lord, the work is Yours. In an indiscernible manner you have guided me."

De La Salle received the notification with calmness and serenity and said only, "God be blessed!"

De La Salle repeated the Brother's prayer, the final verse of the *Maria Mater gratiae*: Mary, mother of mercy, be with us in the hour of our death.

"I adore in all things the will of God in my regard."

Conclusion

- The life of the Founder was penetrated with prayer.
- De La Salle prayed long and intensely.
- The decisive moments in his life were prepared for and accompanied by prayer.
- He sought to discern the will God in prayer.
- His prayer was based on Scripture.
- He led others to prayer and thereby to a relationship with God.
- Prayer was for him help and consolation in life and death.
- He shared his prayer with others.