

PRAYER, THE HEART OF THE BROTHER'S LIFE

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The 42nd General Chapter, as the interpreter and living expression of the charism of the Institute, wanted 1995 to be a year "specifically dedicated to the prayer life of the Brother" (Circular 435, p. 56). We would like to show how prayer, or meditation, is a unifying element in the Brother's life. In effect, the inspiration and dynamism of all the Brother's activities are drawn from prayer. Prayer and ministry are used interchangeably and one refers to the other. The Meditations will guide our reflection.

God, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4), has given children teachers who contribute to the fulfillment of this plan. It is He, says De La Salle, who "*places them in your hands and undertakes to give them everything you ask of him for them*" (Med. 37.3; cf. 193.3). Beginning with this premise, we will reflect about the ministry of the Brother and about the role that prayer must play in it.

1. The Brother's Ministry.

From this multi-faceted ministry we shall deal only with some aspects of it that are more directly tied to our reflection. The Brother appears as the spiritual father, the intercessor, the guardian and the teacher, naturally, of the children confided to his care.

a) The spiritual father.

Although it may seem strange, the Brother is presented by De La Salle as a spiritual father for the children confided to his care. "*God...has destined you to be the spiritual fathers of the children whom you instruct...you have been destined by God to produce children for Jesus Christ, and even to produce and engender Jesus Christ himself in their hearts*" (Med. 157.1 for March 20 - St. Joachim - between 110 and 111 in the 1994 Landover publication).

b) The intercessor.

There is, of course, only one mediator between God and humankind, but on some occasions De La Salle speaks in an analogical way about the role of intercessor or mediator that the Brother is called to play in favor of his disciples. "*You should be their intercessors with God to obtain for them by your prayers the piety which you cannot procure for them by all the care you*

take to teach them" (Med. 157.2), since it belongs to God alone to give "*them everything you ask of him for them*" (Med. 37.3). Also with respect to them, you are "*mediators for them, and God uses you to teach them the way they are to be saved*" (Med. 56.3).

c) The guardian and the protector.

Making use of Greek etymology, De La Salle also says to the Brother that he is a bishop (episkopos), that is to say, "*the vigilant guardian of the flock God has entrusted to you...you are obliged to keep watch over all those who belong to it*" (Med. 186.3). To avoid what might make this term sound strange, one could also speak with more clarity about a guardian and protector. The image of the Good Shepherd, full of solicitude and tenderness, seems to describe better still the profound attitude of the Brother toward those confided to his care (1).

To balance this point of view, De La Salle reminds the Brother of the accounting he will have to make before God of the souls of his students: "*The soul of each one of those you guide is infinitely dear to God and if any one of them is lost through your fault, God has said it and he will do it: he will require from you soul for soul*" (Med. 186.3). This may seem excessive but is this not the very vocation of the prophet such as appears in the book of Ezekiel (3:17-21; 33:1-9)?

d) The teacher of sanctity.

It also might seem strange to us, but De La Salle insists on this expression at various times, in order to tell the Brother that he is his disciples' guide on the road to sanctity. Sometimes he uses the very expression of the word sanctity itself: "*in your state of life you are called to procure the sanctification of your pupils ... you must communicate this holiness to them*" (Med. 39.2), "*a great number of graces which you need in your state, both for your own sanctification and for the sanctification of others*" (Med. 95.1).

Often, in a similar way, he speaks of "*preserving innocence*", of "*inspiring his love in the hearts of those whom you instruct*", of "*teaching them the means of salvation*", of "*educating them in the spirit of Christianity*", of "*communicating the Spirit of God to them*", of obtaining for them "*the spirit of piety*", of "*communicating true wisdom to them which is the Christian spirit*" (2).

It is worth the trouble to remember the theme

expressed before, about spirituality, in order to see how demanding that point is: "*Because in your state in life you are called to procure the sanctification of your pupils, you should be holy yourself in no ordinary degree, for you must communicate this holiness to them both by your good example and by the words of salvation which you must address to them every day*" (Med. 39.2).

The reasoning is clear and cannot be dismissed: you are obliged to make saints out of your students, as much with your life as with your teaching. But you cannot give what you do not have. You are obliged, then, to be holy in no ordinary degree. Faced with a such a relentless logic, the Brother needs to surrender to it.

2. The role of prayer in this ministry.

The ministry of the Brother, examined from any aspect, is above all God's work: "*such work can belong to God alone and to those whom he employs for it, who belong entirely to him, have recourse to him continually to procure so great a good*" (Med. 62.1); and that "*it is only the Spirit of God who can give you this disposition*" (Med. 43.2). Desiring to apply that work, isn't it like being a thief, as De La Salle says?: "*If, then, you do not belong to God, if you do not frequently turn to him in prayer, if you teach only external matters to children, if you do not put all your care to give them the spirit of religion, should you not be considered by God as thieves who have broken into his house, who remain there without his consent, who, instead of inspiring your students with the spirit of Christianity as you should, you only teach them things which will be of use to them in this world?*" (Med. 62.1).

a) Learning to speak to God.

The Brother, in his ministry, is called to speak about God and to speak through God. Nevertheless, De La Salle says, "*Be convinced that you will never speak well to your students and win them over to God except in so far as you have learned well to speak to him and to speak about him*" (Med. 64.2). In effect, it is indispensable "*to be assiduous in prayer*" (Med. 80.2) in order to be filled by Him as is necessary in this ministry.

b) To touch hearts.

In order to exercise this ministry of evangelization it is necessary to touch hearts, but this cannot be done "*except by the Spirit of God*". Therefore De La Salle reminds his disciples: "*The more ardently you apply yourselves to prayer for the good of the souls entrusted to you, the more God will help you find the skill to touch their hearts*" (Med. 148.2). Actually, prayer "*is the exercise designed for you by God to procure his graces*" (Med. 129.2; cf. Med. 43.3).

c) Opening oneself to the Spirit.

The community of the Brothers is a house of prayer: this should be the principal occupation of those residing in it. However, "*God's spirit will not reside here and God himself will not pour out his blessings here except insofar as it will be a house of prayer*" (Med. 62.1). The

Brothers, in order to give to young people the spirit of Christianity, that is to say, to fashion Jesus Christ in their hearts and communicate the Spirit of God to them, should be "very assiduous in prayer", since one cannot work for the glory of God and for the salvation of souls without the help of enlightenment and special graces. His ministry will be effective only in the measure that it is supported by God and "*directed by the Holy Spirit*" (Med. 107.1).

De La Salle also invites his disciples to often surrender themselves to the Spirit of Jesus Christ: "*the Holy Spirit will come to you and will teach you, as Jesus Christ promises his holy apostles, all the truths of religion and the maxims of Christianity which you should know and practice very perfectly, since you are obliged to inspire them in others*" (Med. 191.2); and in another place, the Spirit will be poured out upon youth who then will be able "*to possess fully the Christian spirit*" (Med. 195.2).

d) Guide on the road to sanctity.

The Brothers, as we have seen, should communicate sanctity to their disciples. Who has not felt unprepared and at times even frightened faced with a similar task? This is another reason De La Salle wants his disciples "*to be applied to prayer assiduously and affectionately in order to draw down on yourself a great number of graces which you need in your state, both for your own sanctification and for the sanctification of others*" (Med. 95.1). Doing all these actions in a spirit of prayer "*is one of the best ways to sanctify them*" (Med. 129.2). At the same time this is the route, the staff and the food for the journey.

e) Praying fervently.

God has entrusted such a great mission to the Brothers that for its exercise they can do nothing else but pray constantly. Therefore De La Salle says: "*Beg him (God), therefore, most earnestly that nothing may make you displeasing in his sight*" (Med. 39.1), but on the contrary, "*that after filling you with his Holy Spirit to sanctify yourselves, he also communicate himself to you in order to procure the salvation of others*" (Med. 95.1). In this way, assiduous prayer will be able to "*draw down upon yourselves the light you must have to know how to form Jesus Christ in the hearts of the children who are entrusted to your guidance, and give them the spirit of God*" (Med. 80.2), (3).

For the exercise of his ministry, De La Salle exhorts his disciples to pray; on the one hand, to assure the fecundity of their evangelizing action with youth: "*all your instructions must be given life by his Spirit and draw all their power from him. Just as he is the one who enlightens everyone coming into the world, he also is the one who enlightens the minds of your students and leads them to love and to practice the good that you teach them*" (Med. 195.3); and on the other hand, to overcome difficulties, "*explaining to him the difficulties you have experienced in guiding them. Jesus Christ, seeing that you regard him as the one who can do everything in your work and yourself as an instrument that ought to be moved only by him, will not fail to grant you what you ask of him*" (Med 196.1).

By their prayer, the Brothers also assume the role of intercessors for those the Lord has confided to their care. They will lack nothing they need for salvation, given that God himself is in charge of giving them all that their teachers have asked for them (Med. 37.3), often, fervently, insistently (cf. Med. 122.1; 157.2; 187.2). "*You should also pray much to God for those you see less inclined to piety so that God will put in their hearts a desire for salvation. You are mediators for them, and God uses you to teach them the way they are to be saved*" (Med. 56.3; cf. 189.3).

f) Being the faithful messengers of God.

In the Meditations for the Time of Retreat, De La Salle, beginning with Jacob's dream in Bethel (Genesis 28:10-19), calls attention to the role of the guardian angels to characterize the ministry of the Brother: "*It is your duty*", he says, first "*to go up to God every day by prayer to learn from him all that you must teach your children*", and second, "*to come down to them by accommodating yourself to their level in order to instruct them about what God has communicated to you for them in your prayer as well as in the Holy Scriptures, which contain the truths of religion and the maxims of the holy Gospel*" (Med. 198.1).

Meditations 197 and 198 present the entire dynamic of the ministry of the Brother. Apart from the chronological order which appears in the two movements, it is rather the existential order which is important to discover and appreciate. Here we come into contact with a triple relationship: God, source of all good and all knowledge; youth, limited by all kinds and forms of circumstances and, therefore, devoid of hope; the Brother, who should be the intermediary between the two.

On one side, there is the Trinity: the Father, who "is Love" (1 John 4:8), the Son, who is "the Light of life" (John 8:12); and the Spirit, who "has access to all Truth" (John 16:13). The Brother will never cease to deepen his understanding of the Christian mystery (Ephesians 1:3-14), this design of the Father's love that is fulfilled in the Son by the Spirit. The Brother is invited to come to this clear fountain of love, life and truth, in order to constantly drink from it in prayer.

From this intimacy and depth of the developing relationship with God, everything else is derived. In effect, it is God who permits entry into his mystery of love and teaches one to share it with those confided to one's care.

On the other side are young people, in specific situations and socio-cultural contexts. They are poor, that is to say, they lack everything; they more and more feel an existential emptiness in themselves and in their surroundings and at the same time they aspire to the fulness of their being and they desire to surpass their limits. Each Brother is invited to sympathize with these specific young people, the way in which they live, in order to be able to have a language which makes them accessible to these young people (cf. Rule 14, 15).

It is up to the Brother to relate these two worlds as collaborators with Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:9) (4), the only mediator between God and mankind (1 Timothy 2:5-6). It is up to the Brother to decipher the Gospel message, adapting it to the conditions of young people without making it lose its strength, and proposing concrete and well-adapted means for making it happen in daily life. That is his primary role.

It is not surprising, then, the insistence of De La Salle in convincing the Brothers of the essential connection that exists between prayer and ministry: "*The more ardently you apply yourselves to prayer for the good of the souls entrusted to you, the more God will help you find the skill to touch their hearts*" (Med. 148.2) (5). A possible translation for this formula might be: **prayer and meditation = apostolic effectiveness.**

(1) Cf. M. 196, 1; M. 101, 3; M. 33; M. 80, 3; M. 115, 3; M. 119, 3; M. 134, 2.

(2) Cf. M. 62, 1; M. 39, 1; M. 56, 3; M. 80, 2; M. 122, 1; M. 157, 2.

(3) Cf. M. 107, 1; M. 196, 1; M. 95, 1.

(4) One should analyze Meditations 195 and 196, where De La Salle deals with this topic, but space here does not permit it.

(5) Cf. M. 64, 2; M. 80, 2; M. 95, 1; M. 129, 2; M. 191, 2; M. 196, 1.