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THE PRAYER OF THE BROTHER

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In the first of these two articles I outlined three of the most important aspects for an authentic Lasallian spirituality relevant to the whole of the Lasallian Family in to-day's world and indicated that one of the constants in the development of such a spirituality down the years has been the role of prayer. In this second article I would like to develop this theme by concentrating more specifically on the prayer-life of the Brother and, in particular, on the nature and importance of his personal prayer. The absence, in this article, of any reference to the community dimension of his prayer is prompted partly by the constraints of time and space but more by my assumption that the Brother who is really trying to live a personal prayer relationship with God will also be attempting to live the community dimension to the full.

The vocation of the Brother, as with any vocation, has its roots in that mysterious encounter in the depths of one's being with the ever-faithful and all-holy God who, through the action of His Spirit, gently stirs, moves, calls and guides the Brother to a progressive commitment, through the human and Christian education of youth, to the pursuit of the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus. At the heart of that encounter is an experience of intimacy which, even if only faintly experienced initially, ultimately inspires and makes sense of all the commitments of the Brother (1). He has, as it were, been captivated by God and this experience impinges on every aspect of his life gently prompting him to embrace a more authentic style of life in all its dimensions. Thus, for example, the intimate nature of this union helps him make sense of the renunciations consistent with a life of celibate chastity to which he feels drawn without negating his human reality. This point was well made in a recent interview by Cristina Kauffman, Abbess of an enclosed Carmelite convent, who suggests that these renunciations - for example, not only of the physical reality of parenting a child but also of the companionship of a woman, of a wife, of organizing one's life etc - are not "cured" by showers, neither of water nor of the spirit! She goes on to suggest that we don't have to try to "cure" anything in that we are faced with a renunciation which we have to live every day and that, "if we have an authentic vocation, this renunciation becomes "cured" at its

roots as a consequence of God's: a call to a relationship which places all other options on another level - it doesn't destroy them, it simply moves them to a different level. In consequence, these renunciations are lived out in serenity with a profound sense of what they signify ..." (2)

Captivated by God, the Brother is thus led to channel all his affective energies through this relationship into the service of the Kingdom. Clearly, therefore, the Brother's generous and loving apostolic response, which De La Salle calls the spirit of zeal, is one way of cultivating this relationship of intimacy with the God who continues to call him (3) but, as many Brothers have discovered, missionary or apostolic activity which becomes an end in itself leads to a spiritual vacuum, a crisis of identity or meaning, in which this relationship is stifled and eventually destroyed through lack of adequate nourishment. As De La Salle so often indicated (4), the primary source of nourishment of this intimate union is the Brother's personal prayer-life, itself a gratuitous gift of God, in which he daily takes the concerns of his life before the triune God whose glory he is consecrated to procure, desiring to renew that consecration and, in so doing, to nurture and deepen that relationship initiated in Baptism and nurtured through his initial vocational encounter as a Brother. For an authentic prayer relationship leads not only to changing perspectives on mission and community, as one progressively views these with "eyes of faith", but also to a changing relationship with God; if such a change does not take place, to quote Cristina Kauffman again, religious "...run the risk of having the same image of God when they are seventy as when they entered religious life. God is always the same but the image we have of Him needs to change with life's phases" (5). This risk is still with us because, as Ignacio Mengs pointed out in his contribution to the 1980 Symposium on Prayer in an article which still has much relevance, such a developmental experience of prayer has not always been the experience of some Brothers. He suggests that, while many Brothers have continued developing their competence in educational or administrative fields, a similar developmental process has not occurred with their prayer life. Consequently, their prayer has remained at an "adolescent stage" so that

they are often "under-nourished and under-developed spiritually" with the result that prayer has lost its importance in their scale of values (6). Yet without the nourishment of an adequate prayer-life it is difficult to envisage how the relationship between the Brother and God can be sustained.

As indicated above, a significant feature of the Brother's relationship with God is that it involves all the concerns of his life. In other words, it is not some sort of mystical or ethereal relationship which is somehow disembodied from the reality in which the Brother finds himself, a reality in which he seeks to integrate harmoniously the three foci of mission, community and consecration. The "content" of the Brother's prayer is thus drawn from his life experience while the experience of prayer - that personal time which the Brother sets apart to specifically cultivate his intimate relationship with God - inspires and illumines this life experience. This integration of prayer and life is exemplified by De La Salle in the "Meditations for the Time of Retreat" where, referring to the educational ministry of the Brother, he encourages the Brothers to go before the Lord with the concerns of their pupils "to learn from Him all that you must teach (them), and then come down to them by accommodating yourself to their level in order to teach them what God has communicated to you for them..." (7) However, this application clearly goes far beyond the specific teacher-pupil relationship to embrace every relationship in which the Brother finds himself on life's journey. Each of his relationships - in family, in school, in community, in the District, etc - along with whatever aspect of ministry in which he happens to be involved forms part of the "content" of his relationship with God. Since the "first apostolate" of the Brother is the witness of his consecrated life there will always, therefore, be a direct apostolic aspect to his prayer even in retirement (8).

This integration, which was a feature of De La Salle's own life and clearly expressed in his personal rule by which he tried to make no distinction between the matters proper to his state and those which referred to his sanctification and perfection (9), finds another expression in the second part of his "*Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer*" where he encourages his Brothers towards the end of their prayer to look at some specific ways in which their prayer might directly impact on their life during the rest of the day by making "resolutions" which should be "present" - ie. to be practised on the same day that they are made - "particular" - ie. applicable to situations which can be foreseen - and "efficacious" - ie. care should be taken to put them into practice (10). Obviously, the Brother who is prepared to take such practical steps to integrate prayer with life will be attempting to live in a particular way since the inspiration of all his action comes from the experience of that loving relationship with the faithful Abba of his life. This is not to say that, as it were, he "always gets it right", or that he doesn't experience the frustration and humbling experience of sin and failure, but rather that, in the midst of that

humbling experience, he becomes all the more conscious of that loving God through the experience of community and sacramental reconciliation as well as of his own need to rely much more on God's fidelity than on his own goodness or efforts. If his relationship with God is really deep and profound, if it is the source of his life, then it becomes the reference point for all of his activity whatever its nature since he is attempting to live in the presence of Him who gives meaning to his life. Admittedly, such a grace does not emerge overnight yet, lest we become down-hearted, it is worth reminding ourselves that even De La Salle himself had to work hard at living in the presence of God and was prepared to adopt very practical measures to attain his goal! (11) This is not to say that we have to adopt the same measures to-day but it does suggest that the attainment of such basic Christian virtues requires constancy.

A further consequence of this desire to integrate prayer with life will be the attempt by the Brother to view all reality from the perspective of his relationship with God. De La Salle termed this the spirit of faith through which he invited his Brothers to allow the whole complexity of life's relationships and events to be filtered by reference to the designs of the God "whose ways are not our ways" rather than simply view them from the perspective of human motivation and interpretation. To integrate these human impulses in such a way that they are given this God-dimension is the work of a life-time - and the journey is often circuitous and repetitive - but the task begins anew each morning with the desire to encounter the living Lord in all the circumstances of one's day. To obviate the danger that the Brother "create" an image of God in his own likeness it is essential, too, that his prayer be nourished by the Scriptures and that his life be challenged by the Gospel of Jesus whom he is committed to follow and with whom he renews the offering of his life in his daily Eucharist.

An indication of the strength of this desire may be seen in one's willingness to check out regularly - eg. at the end of the day - what actually has been the experience of God during the day. The traditional way of doing this has been by some form of "examen" of which there are many modern forms which continue to be useful to many people. In the last analysis, if the Brother's relationship with God is really the source of his life then he is going to put in place the means by which this relationship can flourish and these means are usually very practical: for example, he is going to find a time and a place for his personal daily prayer, he is going to find appropriate means of living in the presence of God, of relating all his daily circumstances to his relationship with God, of nourishing his prayer through Scripture and regular spiritual reading, of checking out how he has been trying to foster this relationship, of "recharging" the batteries at regular intervals through days of recollection or retreats.

As suggested above, the strength of the Brother's relationship with God, and the value he attributes to

it, can be measured by the nature of the means he adopts to cultivate that relationship as well as by the constancy with which he applies them; the practical means which the Brother personally adopts are thus a clear indication of the extent to which prayer is his "first and principal" daily exercise. As the Rule points out, prayer is a gift which we constantly need to ask for and the loving response, once having received the gift in whatever measure, is to ensure that it is nurtured. This nurturing process can be relatively easy in times of consolation but it is a rather more arduous task, yet nonetheless essential, to continue that process in times of difficulty. Hence, finally, the necessity of constancy as an essential support for an authentic prayer-life helping one, in particular, to come through these crises of aridity and desolation to experience once again the faithfulness of God. According to Schneiders, who interprets the present reality of religious life from the perspective of John of the Cross's "Dark Night", this virtue of constancy is all the more important in our day. Her final tentative suggestion for negotiating the passage of the Dark Night calls for perseverance in prayer "no matter what happens or what does not happen" adding that *"prayer needs the nourishment of time and place and effort the way a match in a gale needs a protecting hand..."* (12) Her encouragement to pray through aridity and desolation is consistent both with De La Salle's own experience of the Dark Night as well as with his teaching to the Brothers on the efficacy of such constancy which finds clear expression in his meditation on St Theresa; *"...In the midst of the greatest aridities she was lost in God and completely abandoned to His good pleasure, despite the interior obscurity in which she found herself. The more the Almighty chose that she should suffer, the more confidently she had recourse to Him. In Him she found all, however hidden He might be. Faith alone was her guide when she was in this state, and served her as a light. As she found all in God, so also she saw God in all things..."* (13)

(1) See R.22

(2) See *"Reinado Social"* (Sacred Heart publication), N 758, July 1994, p.19

(3) See R. 100

(4) The present Rule, in article 69, specifically re-affirms the teaching of De La Salle in inviting the Brothers to look upon meditation *"as the first and principal of their daily exercises and the one most capable of drawing down God's blessing on all the others..."* See, also, for example, MSF:177 for the feast of St Theresa; *"...Such is the fruit of frequent and fervent meditation, namely, to enjoy God by anticipation as far as this is possible by faith here below. If you love God, mental prayer will be the food of your soul. God will enter into you and will let you eat at His table... You will then enjoy the advantage of having Him always present in your actions and you will have nothing in view but His good pleasure. You will hunger after Him..."*

(5) See *"Reinado Social"*, p.22

(6) See *"La Oración en La vida del Hermano Hoy"*, pp.97-98, in *"Symposium for Tercentenary"*, Rome, 1980. Mengs suggests that part of the reason for this "under-nourishment" in prayer lies in the volume of work which Brothers have to undertake to-day, which leaves little time for spiritual reading and quiet prayer, allied to the fact that many Brothers have not had an adequate formation to enable them to live integrated lives.

(7) See MTR 6:1

(8) See R.24

(9) See *"Rules which I have imposed upon myself"* in Blain, Vol 11, p.318; English translation in Edwin Bannon's *"De La Salle: A Founder as Pilgrim"*, p.143, De La Salle Provincialate, London.

(10) See *"Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer"*, (1912 ed.), p.89

(11) See, for example, *"Rules which I have imposed upon myself"*, n° 5: *"...I shall unite my actions to those of Jesus Christ at least twenty times a day, and I shall strive to make my views and intentions accord with his. For this purpose I shall have a small piece of paper which I shall pierce each time I make an act of union; and for every one that I shall have omitted on any day, I shall say a Pater before retiring, kissing the floor once for each Pater."* These "Rules" are found in Blain, Vol 11, p.318. This English translation is taken from Edwin Bannon's *"De La Salle: A Founder as Pilgrim"*, p.142.

(12) See the essay by Sandra Schneiders, *"Contemporary Religious Life: Death or Transformation"*, pp.29-31, in *"Religious Life: The Challenge for To-morrow"*, ed. Cassian J. Yuhaus. Paulist Press, 1994.

(13) MSF 177:3