

MINISTERIAL PRAYER

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Lasallian prayer can be considered from various points of view. There is meditation on the Word of God, mental prayer, personal and community vocal prayer, and so on.

In this article we should like to draw attention to a specific aspect which is linked to all the forms of prayer indicated and suggested by De La Salle: the prayer of the Lasallian as educator. When a Lasallian prays he is, and feels he is, at the very heart of his educational ministry; he brings into his prayer the real world of his educational relationships and apostolic concerns; and he sees prayer also as one of the most effective tools of the apostolate.

De La Salle, in fact, is very explicit about the need, the effectiveness and the form of this "*ministerial prayer*".

We should like to highlight in a very summarised form its main characteristics and the reasons for them, using the precise, challenging and, in this context, warm and stimulating language of the Founder, that great man of prayer with the great heart of an apostle.

1. Thank God for the gift of the ministry

This is a necessary first step and a pre-condition if we are to acknowledge God's role in our apostolic work: "Thank God that he has had the goodness to call upon you to procure such a great advantage for children" (Med. 194,1).

Implicit in our gratitude, there is an awareness of the greatness of our ministry and of our responsibility to exercise it with fidelity: "Thank God for the grace he has given you in your work, of sharing in the ministry of the holy apostles and of the great bishops and pastors of the Church. Take pride in your ministry" (Med. 199,3).

2. Ask God to help us exercise this ministry

* In Lasallian thinking, educational work is not an exclusively human operation. For De La Salle, it is, in fact, God's own saving action. An educator cannot consider himself as its primary and independent agent.

A consequence of this deep conviction is the need for the educator to make the effectiveness of his ministry both the consequence and object of his prayers. De La Salle is very clear about this: "*Be convinced of what St Paul says, that you plant and water the seed, but it is God through Jesus Christ who makes it grow*, and he is the one who brings your work to fulfilment. So when you encounter some difficulty in the guidance of your disciples...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*" (Med. 196,1).

* What is taught, and especially religious instruction and whatever concerns salvation, is the fruit of the ministerial prayer of the educator. Referring to Jacob's vision, the Founder emphasises this point strongly: "You must do the same thing for the children entrusted to your care. It is your duty to go up to God every day by mental prayer to learn from him all that you must teach your children, 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 - as much in your mental prayer as in the holy scriptures which furnish you with the truths of religion and the practical maxims of the gospels" (Med. 198,1).

Prayer is therefore also the primary source of ministerial formation, because it makes it possible to drink from the very fountain of truth and salvation.

The educator must follow the example of John the Baptist: "This Saint...began his mission...by disposing his heart to receive the plenitude of God's Holy Spirit that he might worthily fulfil his mission" (Med. 2,2; Cf. Med. 3,3).

* Even when De La Salle encourages his disciples to pray for themselves, he does not lose sight of the fact that any personal improvement has a ministerial effect. It seems as if he can never envisage the educator except in the context of his pupils: "You should pray, then, that there may be nothing in you displeasing in God's sight, since you have to instil his holy love in the hearts of those whom you instruct" (Med. 39,1).

The passage that follows is particularly remarkable in this connection. It stresses clearly the close connection between personal sanctification and ministerial effectiveness, as well as that between prayer and the understanding of one's own mission: "By your state you

are held to the love of prayer in order to draw down those graces needed for your sanctification as well as that of others. Rest assured that the better you apply yourself to prayer the better you will acquit yourself of the duties of your state, for as you are incapable of yourself of doing anything helpful towards the salvation of souls, you ought frequently to address yourself to God to obtain from him that which in your profession you have to communicate to others" (Med. 95,1).

3. Pray for the pupils

This is the focal and culminating point of ministerial prayer. During prayer, there are faces that interpose constantly between God and the educator. These are the faces of the pupils. They do not distract from prayer; in fact, they give it more life and depth. There are faces calling for discernment, faces far from salvation, faces that are open and eager, faces with problems, faces asking for help, faces saying thank you...

These cannot but be the object and focus of the prayer of an educator who asks God to help him fulfil his ministry: "You should be a man of prayer, for you have to intercede not only for yourself but also for those for whom you are responsible, and for the good of their souls" (Med. 187,2).

There are a number of points regarding the pupils that De La Salle considers very important:

* Every pupil has to be treated according to his needs and in a way that is best for his good. For De La Salle, this is a fundamental educational principle: "This varied conduct must depend on knowledge and discernment of character, and this grace you must beg of God most earnestly, as being one of the most essential for you in the direction of those over whom you have charge" (Med. 33,1). De La Salle, however, does not believe that observation, assessment and psychological insight are enough, even though the Conduct of Schools shows us clearly that he considers them very important. What is needed also is discernment which is the fruit of prayer and a gift from God. Each pupil must be thought about individually in the presence of God.

* Often, pupils have problems the educator is not able to deal with by using the usual means at his disposal: the intervention of God is essential in order to "touch hearts" which, humanly speaking, seem to be closed: "You must therefore devote yourself very thoroughly to prayer in order to succeed in your ministry. You must constantly represent the needs of your disciples to Jesus Christ, explaining to him the difficulties you experience in guiding them. Jesus Christ, seeing that you regard him as the one who can do everything and yourself as an instrument to be moved only by him, will not fail to grant you what you ask" (Med. 196,1).

* It is God who saves and brings to fruition. The educator is his mediator. *Mediation* takes place through zealous and committed educational work, but

it begins in prayer, a special and effective time for mediation: "You should pray fervently for those whom you find are least inclined to piety, that God may make them feel the importance of salvation. You act as mediator in their regard, God making use of you to teach them the means of salvation" (Med. 56,3).

God chooses to depend on this mediation, as De La Salle expresses so clearly: "This God of mercy places them in your keeping, promising to give them all that you ask for them... As he knows that you do not have sufficient virtue or influence to supply them with these things, he desires that you should ask him to do so, often, fervently, insistently. Thus owing to your care, nothing will be lacking for them of what is necessary for salvation" (Med. 37,3).

* When an educator prays, all his pupils should be present in his heart. If there has to be a priority, as at all other times in the educational process, it has to be given *to the weakest and the most in need*: "You have two kinds of children to instruct: those who are idlers and inclined to evil, and those who are good or who, at least, have a tendency to good. Pray continually for both, after the example of St Marcellinus, and more especially for those who are prone to wickedness. Try to preserve the good and confirm them in the practice of virtue" (Med. 186,3).

* Praying for pupils is essential at those delicate moments in teaching when there is a need *to reprimand and to correct*. If this is to be effective, according to De La Salle, it has to be "under the guidance of the Spirit of God. That is why, before undertaking them [reproofs and corrections], it is desirable to become interiorly recollected, to give oneself up to God's Spirit, and to be disposed to make the reproof and correction with the greatest possible wisdom and in a manner best suited to make them useful for the one receiving them" (Med. 204,1).

* The traditional Lasallian practice of *remembering the presence of God* is very much a form of ministerial prayer.

Recalling the presence of God is a good means of assessing our intentions when teaching, and of driving away anything that can distract us from a total commitment to our educational ministry. It serves also to permeate everything we do or decide with the spirit of faith, which is at the same time the fruit and a necessary condition for prayer life.

4. The close connection between prayer and ministry

The "Declaration" of the 39th General Chapter on "The Brother of the Christian Schools in the world today" lays much stress on the need to integrate the various dimensions of a Brother's life and to unify it. It reflects what the Founder said about the close identification of the apostolic ministry with the spiritual life: "Make no distinction between the duties of your state and your sanctification", and warns against apostolic

activity which is not supported and strengthened by prayer: "The Brother ought to have no fear of losing God when he goes among the young to serve them (Mk 10,44), nor of being estranged from Christ when he spends himself for men (2 Cor 12,15). On the contrary, the fulfilment of the authentic apostolate is a source for him of spiritual growth; in listening to men he disposes himself to listen more faithfully to the Word of God; in forgetting himself, he allows Christ to grow in him; in spending himself without counting the cost, disinterestedly, his heart becomes that of a poor man. Apostolic action degenerates into empty activity or into self-seeking only when one loses the ability to see the call of God in the real needs of the world. It is the awareness of these needs that leads the Brother to give himself to prayer, to turn always more and more to God who alone is capable of building his kingdom" (Decl 25,2).

De La Salle had mentioned this close connection when writing to Brother Hubert on May 5th 1702: "One of your main preoccupations, my very dear Brother, should be to apply yourself to prayer and to your class work, for these are your two principal occupations and the ones for which you will have to give an account to God" (Letter 7).

5. Praying for the Institute, a shared concern in the ministry

The ministry of individual educators cannot be divorced from the apostolic work of all those who, "together and by association" exercise the same ministry.

Ministerial prayer is also prayer that brings to God the needs of the apostolic family to which one belongs, and in which one finds the source and the support for one's personal commitment.

"Look upon this, then, as a considerable reward which God gives you, even in this world, to see, by means of the establishment of the schools placed by God in your responsibility, that religion and the practice of the faith are increased among the faithful, especially among the working class and the poor. *Thank God every day*, through Jesus Christ our Lord, that he has been pleased to establish this benefit and to give his support to the Church. Pray to him fervent-

ly, too, that he will be pleased to make your Institute grow and bear fruit day by day, so that, as St Paul says, *the hearts of the faithful may be strengthened in holiness and in justice*" (Med. 207,3).

It is clear then that ministerial prayer has a vocational dimension too. This idea can be found in De La Salle's letters, where it is expressed in practical and concrete terms: "We have just opened schools at Versailles, Boulogne sur Mer and Moulins. Pray that God may increase them more and more" (Letter 29).

Conclusion

The Founder's teachings are all brought together and excellently summarised for us in the Rule, and in language which reflects his, especially in this article:

"The spirit of faith kindles in the Brothers an ardent zeal for those confided to their care in order to open their hearts to receive the salvation revealed in Jesus Christ. This zeal, enlivened by the Holy spirit, inspires their apostolic prayer and the activities of their educational ministry. In this way they participate in the Gospel mission of the Church. Through the promotion of justice and peace, they cooperate in the building up of the kingdom of God" (Rule 7).

The Rule draws attention also to other basic aspects of Lasallian ministerial prayer: "It is through Christ, the unique mediator with the Father, that the Brothers present to God their own concerns, those of their students, of the people who are close to them, and indeed, those of the entire world" (Rule 66).

"The Brothers provide for moments of personal prayer during the course of the day, aware that this strengthens their willingness to be of service and enhances the quality of their apostolic action" (Rule 68b).

Finally, the Rule describes the most fraternal and apostolically urgent form of this personal prayer: "The Founder gives this recommendation: *«Ask God that he will be pleased to make your Institute grow and bear fruit day by day»*. This stimulates the Brothers to organise prayers for vocations in their communities, in their apostolic centres, among the parents of the students, the teachers, friends and the young people themselves" (Rule 84).