

**YOU OUGHT EARNESTLY TO BEG OF
GOD THIS SPIRIT OF PRAYER
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**According to John Baptist de La Salle,
what is mental prayer?**

In the *Duties of a Christian*, John Baptist de la Salle distinguishes between two ways of praying:

"God wanted people to apply themselves to prayer in two different ways: with their heart and with their lips.

Prayer with the heart is usually called prayer or mental prayer. That is, with the mind, because the body plays no part in it. This is the prayer through which we fulfil our duty to God and tell him of our needs, **speaking solely with the heart.**

The prayer of the lips is normally called prayer or vocal prayer. This is so because it is made with the voice and words, with which we give honour to God and tell him what we need or what is useful for our salvation" (DA 405,1,2 & 3).

Mental prayer, therefore, is a way of praying which consists in turning to God, in silence and in one's heart. One could be tempted to think that this is a purely intellectual activity or simply reflection. It shares some of their characteristics: silence, stillness (in general), a particular place that is secluded and quiet, apparent lack of activity.

It has to be said that the definition given by John Baptist de La Salle can lead to this confusion. He speaks of mental prayer and does not seem to make a distinction between the prayer of the heart and the prayer of the mind. He stresses that the body plays no part in it, a debatable point, to say the least. It also gives us an insight into how he perceived the individual in the presence of God.

Nevertheless, the end of the passage takes up again the image of the heart: **making mental prayer is speaking to God solely with the heart.**

The body and mental prayer

Like St John Chrysostom, John Baptist de La Salle does not confine this prayer of the heart to any particular place:

"People have also this advantage, that they can pray to God with their heart at all times and on all occasions. As St Chrysostom says, a person can walk around a town and pray with great attention; or a person can be with his friends and have his mind turned to God; or a person doing something can invoke God with great fervour and devotion (DA 405,1,10).

The fact that De la Salle does not take the physical aspect and human relations seriously calls for some critical comment. A case in point is when De La Salle says that it is the mind (intelligence?) which applies itself to God and not the

heart. This kind of verbal gymnastics is difficult to follow. One has the impression that the realities of everyday life are cast aside and that, too often, one lives on two levels.

What is important is to be able to pray, that is to say, to meet God everywhere and to have a conversation with him.

When De La Salle tells us in the *Duties of a Christian* or in the *Meditations* what conditions are necessary for mental prayer, he speaks of the body, of silence and of special places for this encounter.

"Although we can pray to God in all kinds of postures, when we pray in private, Christian piety and the respect due to God dictate that we do so with both knees on the floor, without support, without resting on our heels and with a very recollected and modest outward appearance" (DA 402,210).

"It is also a fairly common practice to pray with hands joined. Likewise, according to Tertullian, it is an ancient practice of the Church to pray with hands raised to heaven" (DA 402,2,13).

One can also pray standing (Eastertime, Sundays) or with arms outstretched as on a cross (Good Friday), turned towards the East, where Jesus was crucified.

"Regarding the eyes, some turn them towards heaven to show that they are speaking to God who is present especially there. This is what Our Lord did on a number of occasions when he asked his Father for a special grace. Others lower them humbly like the publican to show the confusion they feel because of their sins and through respect for God" (DA 402,2,14).

**Prayer, an activity
in the depths of one's being**

The explanations given in De La Salle's *Method of Mental Prayer*, the context of his examples, his insistence on the various levels of prayer - reasoning, reflecting, simple attention - stress the fact that mental prayer takes place in the heart, in the depths of the soul, the most intimate part of the soul.

"This prayer is called interior, because it is not simply an activity of the mind, but of all the powers of the soul, and because, if it is to be very pure and very solid, it has to take place in the depths of the soul, that is, in the most intimate part of the soul" (EM 1,3).

Its principal characteristic is the love of God and the desire to be united to him.

"Mental prayer is called an interior activity because during it the soul does what it is intended for in this life, that is, to

know and love God, and to take all the means necessary to achieve these two aims.

But the principal activity of the soul in mental prayer that is truly interior is to fill itself with God and to unite itself interiorly with him. For the soul this is a form of apprenticeship, a foretaste, through faith, of what it will do in reality for all eternity.

That is why this form of mental prayer is called an application of the soul to God" (EM 1,5 & 6).

One can note also the importance of faith in this activity.

As we study the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer* we should take care not to let ourselves be imprisoned by De La Salle's concept of man.

It is a familiar concept, it is true, or at least, it is a concept widespread in the West. It reflects the penny catechism used by many adults, the way classical authors thought and the way people normally spoke about man and God. It is a dualistic concept which we find difficult to abandon.

We are body and soul, but the body has disappeared once again. The soul is mind and heart. Sometimes, at least in the way in which it is expressed, the soul is confused with the mind, or the soul with the heart. And the heart has several degrees of depth.

We have here an invitation to clarify our own understanding of what man is and of what life means to him. The biblical concept of man could help us in this.

Speak to him of love

As we try to understand mental prayer as an activity of the heart, we can say:

To pray without ceasing does not mean so much thinking all the time about God, because prayer is not first of all a thinking activity. It is rather to love without ceasing. A person who loves can do so all the time.

Mental prayer is neither meditation, nor quiet spiritual reading, nor reading the Word of God, nor any intellectual activity. Since all these elements are a part of it in various degrees, one might be tempted to go no further. Mental prayer is a special way of being with God which cannot be

reduced to any one of the above activities. It is rooted in our existence as human beings. It is moulded by the Word of God, practised through faith, animated by the Holy Spirit, who ceaselessly makes present the mystery of God made manifest in Jesus Christ.

Mental prayer is a conversation with God in order to speak to him of love.

Prayer is a question of love. We need to share our love, to declare it, to hear ourselves declare it. We need time to check it. Because of the special nature of the meeting between man and his God in prayer, we need moments when we can place our experiences in the sight of God, when we can place ourselves in his sight and in his love. We need to do this in order to become aware, in the depths of our soul, that God looks at us with love, but also that we too can look at him with love.

To pray is to serve God

It is the Holy Spirit himself who leads us to take the time to pray. For De La Salle, our vocation to be educators is a ministry, a gift from God for the service of the Church and, in our case as Lasallians, especially for the service of young people.

Our vocation is to reveal the existence of his plan of salvation in our lives and in the lives of those entrusted to us, and to make it relevant.

Our service consists in working, by a fraternal ministry, for the revelation of the mystery of God, which is, that he loves us, that he makes us his children and that he wishes to welcome us into his presence.

In this service, prayer is essential. Mental prayer is the best way to know God, to meet him and to draw close to him. It is essential in order to fulfil the mission he has entrusted to us in the way he wants.

Also, if Lasallian prayer is a meeting with God, it is first of all a meeting for the service of others. It is first of all ministerial prayer and, as such, it is an integral part of the ministry.