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DYNAMIC TENSIONS OF LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY

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INTRODUCTION

Prayer presents a **tension** in life when it puts two apparently contradictory worlds into relationship with one another, God's and mankind's. A dynamic originates from this tension which will assume, as a synthesis, the already present reality of the Kingdom of God

Living this tension consciously - or better, the plurality of tensions which it gives rise to - permits the believer to place himself in a **prayer journey**; or, put another way: prayer ceases to be an isolated moment in each day's activities in order to become a process of approaching God which is carried with him throughout life.

Lasallian spirituality is made up of tensions. We can say that its structure is "*dialectic*", not linear. The apparent **contradictions** which are found inside form power poles that occasion prolific tensions. If this is not kept in mind, it's easy to frequently produce a dualistic sensation or dichotomy, far detached from the experience of the Founder's life and the unity that he himself promotes for the life of the Brothers.

On the contrary, these tensions facilitate our spirituality, not only their great capacity for filling the life and ministry of each Brother with meaning, but also the possibility of it being thoroughly lived by different identities, religious and lay, giving occasion to syntheses that are very different from one another.

The tension is present from the very first **generating core** of our spirituality, that bipolar nucleus of **faith and zeal**; or the experience of God which is lived and shared. The rupture of this nucleus produces sterility, stagnation or spiritual death. On the other hand, when one takes on this tension in the deepest part of the person, he is able to cope with apparently extreme situations - but never "stable", as in the case of Elias, taking refuge in the depths of a cave - his interior - on the sacred Mountain, alone before God, fleeing from his people for forty days and forty nights in the desert and who confesses before God that his being here is because of his zeal: the concern for the people who have broken the Covenant... (1 Kings 19; cf. MR 202,1).

The Founder frequently expresses the necessary relationship between those two poles: "*If you want to succeed in your ministry, you must devote yourselves very much to prayer*" (MR 196.1); and even the dynamism that is caused: "*...a continual movement of our actions to Jesus Christ, and of Jesus Christ to us*" (EM 34).

Other times, it separates the poles in such a way - for example, the Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer and the Guide to Schools - that it can produce an impression

of rupture, of mutual disregard and even opposition,...if one does not keep in mind that the framework or context in which La Salle places both poles is **the identity** of the Brother; or, to be more exact, the **ministerial community** of the Brothers gathered in the name of Jesus, called by the Spirit to carry out His salvific mission (cf. EM 24-38): here is where the tension between both poles is shown with real fecundity.

Here I will limit myself to suggest some of the more significant tensions that we find in EM, but which tend to go beyond their framework, projecting themselves on life, and which, therefore, clearly influence Lasallian spirituality.

One final observation: the "*didactic scheme*" is only one way of approximating a **life experience** which, as such, is not able to be sketched. Therefore we must generalize said schematic and leave it in the place where it belongs: as an instrument of understanding.

We can even dispense with the schematic and place that diverse living of relationships in the **interior of our union with Jesus**. When all is said and done, it is there where the Founder is decidedly leading us: to live the Mystery of Christ. In the inner part of this Mystery, **carrying out our ministry**, is where we achieve unity in life, in the context of the apparent contradictions that are constantly being thrown at it.

1. METHOD AND SPIRIT

As soon as one approaches the "*Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer*" written by J. B. de La Salle, something that appears to be like the author's "thesis" jumps out at him throughout the book: **one must make prayer in an orderly way**. The development of the thesis will go on to indicate how to place yourself in the presence of God, how to relate to God, how to pray about a specific topic, how to design prayer about life - "*with present, specific and effective resolutions*" -, and how to conclude the prayer...

But, inside this method, there is a spinal column which supports it and which makes it become an "*antithesis*" of that thesis: **There is nothing more prayerful than that which stirs up and sustains the Spirit of Jesus**.

The author's proposal is, in reality, a type of tension: each one must come to realize his own "*synthesis*"; a vital synthesis that continues to happen throughout the maturation process, different for each person, and of which De La Salle wants us to be conscious.

A) METHOD

The method is established on the **principle of order**: order as a condition and a dynamic of progress, as a means of taking advantage of resources, as a form of controlling (evaluating) advancement in the spiritual life.

It is the same principle (the same "thesis") that De La Salle applies to other areas of the Brother's life: school and community (1).

B) SPIRIT

But De La Salle is not thinking in terms of a mechanical order that automatically produces results. That thesis that he has applied to the spiritual life, the school, the community,...is valid whenever it uncovers **the internal dynamism of life**, and that turns out to be its "antithesis": the spirit (or, better yet, **the Spirit**, because it is the Spirit of Jesus).

In the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer*: It is insisted that the **Holy Spirit** takes the initiative and one must be attentive to its "movements", "its inspirations".

In the *Guide for Schools*: It is the **personal relationship**, the knowledge that the teacher has of each student, the "moving of hearts"...that is the basic principle of education.

In the *Rule*: The three "principal prologues" to Chapters 2°, 3° and 16° point out **the spirit of faith, the spirit of community, the love of God and neighbor** as the three central axes of the community.

- In EM the same basic principle is applied as in the rest of his works: to advance in prayer, order (the "method"), norms, regularity,...are important, but they lose all their meaning if they are not revitalized by a **presence, an interpersonal relationship**, which, in the last analysis, is identified with **the very Spirit of Jesus Christ**, since it is He who makes that relationship possible. The result will not be the same for everyone but, on the contrary, the synthesis which each one arrives at will be translated into a **personal process of maturation under the guidance of the Spirit**.

2. TENSION IS INCLUDED IN THE "METHOD"

Let us now turn our attention to the "method", and, in a more specific way, to what the major part of the EM is about: **the series of acts**. The proposal that we are making here does not consist of an ordered sequence of 21 acts, like "21 steps" that one has to take in order reach the "finish line" of prayer, although later those acts become simplified until they are reduced to the act of faith. That succession of acts only attempts to communicate a tension, in such a way that that tension becomes in us the **dynamism** of our prayer. In few words we would be able to affirm that **the Lasallian method of prayer consists of a tension**. And it is that tension which, pedagogically, furthers the advance along the prayer journey as we shall see.

- The tension established itself always between two power poles and it occasions a dynamic equilibrium, a vital synthesis that places the subject in a new position. There it again plants the first two poles differently from the beginning, which will occasion a new position...Let's look at it in the 9 acts of the First Part:

The "originating pole", that which serves as a point of support, is made up of the first three acts. The force of this "pole" surges from the attraction of God: the one who prays is turned toward God, captured by God's presence, impressed by the encounter, overcome by the covenant of which he is the object...It is, essentially, a joyous moment. In the Lasallian dialectic let us underscore that first position: this is the "thesis" to which one must always return.

The opposite pole, which we might call the "antithesis" is made up the next three acts. In this encounter, in this covenant, it is inevitable that the gaze returns to our poor reality in order to verify the enormous distance between the gift that we receive and the little that we contribute to it. It is not a resigned glance, still less masochistic, but it is the instigator of the desire for purification and the attitude of conversion.

The synthesis is established in the last three acts: it is obtained in Christ ("*Grant that I may only think of Him through you, and that I may love Him only in you*" EM 169). In him the encounter and the covenant with God is clearly achieved, without going back. It is the "**feeling of faith**" of being united to Jesus; is the conscience that I acquire which the "*filling me with God and uniting myself interiorly to Him*" (the Lasallian ideal of prayer) fills me up with Jesus and by Jesus; but this is not because of my own effort but **thanks to the action of the Spirit of Jesus in me**.

Each synthesis which is achieved is **transformed into a new "original pole"** - again the joy of the encounter with God -, which the other pole raises up, that of the confirmation of my smallness and the consequent desire for purification in order to reach the new synthesis, the experience that the Spirit makes the prayer of Jesus to the Father in my innermost being...

- When there is not a vital synthesis, then we begin again starting from zero: the method ceases to be "**the road**" in order become routine repetition. Only when this *dialectic tension* is lived does one find oneself on the road to improvement that De La Salle tried to offer us. From this perspective the warnings that are proposed at the end (EM 325-330) are well understood, where concrete acts are very relative in accord with the process that each follows and with the *movement of the Spirit* in the innermost being of the one who prays.

3. MAN CENTERED IN GOD

In the brief introduction to the Preface (EM 1-6), De La Salle provides a framework for prayer, situates it in the "*innermost part of the soul*" and then points out its objective and reason for being: "*to fill oneself with God and to interiorly unite oneself to God*". Then he immediately presents the first part, which he calls "**recollection**" and he gives it the utmost importance. Let us add that that importance is not only referred to in the exercise of prayer but **in the life of the Brother as a whole**. We again discover that he is dealing with a tension made up of two movements of forces and a vital synthesis to which he tries to lead us as a result of that tension.

- Part of the assumption: **"the spirit"** of man (mind, thought, imagination...) is **scattered** during the day in the multitude of occupations and calls from outside. In order to encounter God it will be necessary to subject oneself to a process of **reunification of the person** which translates into calmness, inner peace, concentration...It is a movement which moves from **extroversion to interiority**; from being scattered out in the world, to reaching the center of oneself.

- And this first movement, as a result will it bring us to the presence of God? Here De La Salle inverts our hope putting us completely within the tension: what occupied the first position, the apparent cause, now becomes the second, the effect:

He begins by saying: *"To apply yourself to the spirit of prayer you must begin by moving completely away from the application to exterior and tangible things..."*

He immediately says: *"You must begin by applying yourself to the presence of God..."* (9).

Right away he confirms this inversion: *"...The application of the presence of God...draws the spirit away from exterior things..."* (10).

- This apparent contradiction is the way of handing down to us that here he is not dealing with a logical order but with a **vital tension**: it is necessary to recollect oneself in order to experience the presence of God; and the presence of God produces in us recollection (see number 11).

Thus he arrives at the conclusion, the synthesis that is the result of that tension: *"...The soul, being filled with God, becomes detached from creatures and becomes interiorized..."* (12).

- As De La Salle plants this tension of "recollection" here in this way as a condition for being able to pray, he is, again, referring us to **the Spirit as the only "author" of our prayer**, like the true force that "calls us" to our inner self, as the authentic cause of our inner peace and unification. Without removing any of the importance from the force that touches us, he avoids us confusing mental concentration with prayer: between one and the other there is a border that we can only negotiate with the help of the Spirit.

The dynamism of "recollection" carries with it a movement of an aloofness from creatures, (cf. numbers 8-13). But it does not remain absorbed in itself but in God: in order to there encounter God and enter into dialogue with Him. Paradoxically, it deals with a decentralization from oneself and an opening towards God and God's presence. This dynamism leads us to see the world, not as it appears externally, but according to God's plan, according to **the Kingdom of God**, which is bursting with creation.

- **The result, the vital synthesis, is the "interior man"**, that is to say, **man centered in God**, the man who has taken on a life-style of one who *"walks before me and is blameless"* (Genesis 17:1). He is the man who incarnates the ideal Christian, the "greeting of community", which St. Paul expresses as a desire and prayer to the Father, *"May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith...so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God"* (Ephesians 3:16-19). All Lasallian spirituality is based on that foundation which is the "interior man" (2).

- In summary, the dynamism of **"recollecion"** permits man to enter into the prayer of life. And the synthesis of **"interiority"**, translated into a deepening of that dimension, permits him to incorporate in his life a new **look of faith** which unifies his existence in accord with the Work of God.

4. THE FIRST STEPS TOWARDS THE PRESENCE OF GOD

EM presents us with different "first steps" or forms for entering into the presence of God. It invites us to place ourselves in one of them and to become penetrated by it. Here we find, above all, those that are related to **the interiority** of the person drawn in to pray, rather than those that are discovered *"in the exercise of work"* and those that are mentioned in meditations. It is clear that, for the Founder, **the key** that sets this tension that we already spoke about in motion and that will produce the vital synthesis **"to live mindful of the presence of God"**, is in the discovery of God in one's own interiority.

- **The search for the sign**, choice or the attraction of a specific first step is the beginning for the establishment of this new tension, this dialectic that will lead us to a **new synthesis of life**. De La Salle lets the attention flow, **from the signs of presence - first steps - to the personal relationship with God**. The "first step" is simply that: one has to go through it and **enter in the house**, where God comes to my encounter and dialogues with me in intimacy. God wants **"an interior worship, in spirit and in truth"** (EM 74), De La Salle will say with regard to the temple as for the house of God; the expression points to the **interiority of the person**, as a real place in which we should worship God.

- In that tension of the **sign** and the **relationship** with God we arrive simultaneously at two points of encounter that end up being coincidental, thanks to the instigation of that tension: **In "the innermost part of the heart"**, in *"the interior of the soul"* we find the **mystery of God**. It is there the Holy Spirit has led us and it is there where He prays and there He takes charge of making present the Sign of God par excellence, the first threshold through which we approach God and God approaches us: **Jesus Christ** (cf. Meditation 62.3).

- The signs of the presence of God have permitted us, then, to introduce us to **that which is truly important: close dialogue with God**, a dialogue instigated and animated by the Spirit of God.

EM does not leave us in the materialism of the signs, but it impels us to **experience the presence** in a way which is constantly improving, even though this may mean **being supported by them**. This places us face to face with the transcendence of a God who will not be dominated and at the same time is approached in many ways. For the Founder, this dialectic led to his own conversion: going from the God of the temple to the God of the community of teachers, to the God of poor young boys. He learned that one must **make God present** there where He wants to be made manifest to us.

- Thus the vital synthesis is produced in us, making grow in an indefinite way the number of "thresholds" by which we discern the presence of God in daily life: the God in my story who leads me *"from one commitment to another"*; the God in my brothers and sisters, in the marginalized man and in the one who hardly has any meaning...My vital activity will be, then, that of living in **view of the manifestations of God** in the world. (cf. EM 1 28.b). This is again the **"walk before me and be blameless"**, but, this time represented by the **sentinel** who tries to **discover where God is, here and now**.

5. CELEBRATING GOD'S PRESENCE IN LIFE

Prayer, for De La Salle, is fundamentally the **celebration of God's presence**. But this celebration begins already with life and from prayer it redesigns itself in life. Celebration refers to specific and limited moments in time; these nourish the life of faith. It is the "*prayer of the heart*" that spontaneously and frequently bursts forth throughout the day: "*Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God*".

The "celebration" of the presence of God in prayer, as the Founder proposes, relies on an unquestionable psychological dynamism: the "**sense of faith**", or that intimate consciousness of being before God which needs to be expressed and communicated in order to continue existing. And, at the same time that it is expressing itself, describing various nuances, it gains profundity and strengthens itself in the interior of the one who prays; it becomes enriched in expression. Behind this **expansive** movement, the same dynamic progressively simplifies its expressions until it remains "*a simple interior view of faith of his divine presence*" (EM 99).

- The celebration puts into practice the definition that EM attributes to prayer at the beginning of the work: "*It is an application of the soul to God*" number 1). "*To apply oneself*" is "to surrender oneself completely", "to let go" (with a dynamic tension) towards God, uniting yourself frequently to Him...And that should be done with the **spirit** (mind, knowledge...) and the **heart**, united in "*the sense of faith*". The stress will not be in "thinking" or "reasoning", but in "**feeling**", as we shall see later. And this feeling is transformed into emotions and not ideas. When De La Salle speaks of "*making some reflections on the acts*" or of accompanying the Sacred Scripture text with some reflection, he is not referring so much to ideas or theological rationalizations as to emotions expressed in a type of dialogue relationship with God.

- The dynamism of the acts (the joyful encounter with God, the humble view of oneself, the impulse toward Christ in the Spirit) produces, as can be expected, a transformation: from "*celebrating the presence of God*" we go dialectically to "*celebrating our union with God in Jesus*"; or put another way: "*celebrating our participation in the Mystery of God through the Holy Spirit*". This movement which is deepened here is present from the first moment of prayer, but it is sent out into life as a **sacramental view**: living and celebrating this union with God, we cannot do other than to view all of it in a sacramental form that changes things, events, people, and one's own life into manifestations of God.

- The final synthesis is this: **I am the presence of God in the world!** This is the theological base for ministry (cf. Meditation 195.2). This is not a centering on one's own person, but on the thankful recognition that the life of God happens through us to the world, to those to whom we have been sent. This vital synthesis is expressed as a paradigm in Mary (cf. Meditation 163.3).

6. PRAYER OF THE HEART: A RELATIONSHIP OF LOVE

To pray "*from the deepest part of the soul*", "*from the innermost part of the heart*", are expressions normally used by De La Salle to say where **prayer should be set** (in Spanish: mental prayer). (3). This is the place where **the relationship with God** is started. It is the "**place of encounter**" of two

presences: God and man. It is there where the Holy Spirit resides and prays (cf. Meditation 62.3).

With the continuing reference throughout EM to this "place of encounter", it is easy to understand the tension that De La Salle proposed to the one who prays:

I should make a prayer which jumps out of me (from "the deepest part"), but not that it is mine but it is the Spirit's within me.

First. A prayer which jumps out of me:

- I put my entire person at the disposal of the prayer. This deals with an "**interior**" prayer: an "**occupation**" of *all the power of the soul* (EM 3), which has to reach the root of one's being: "*the most secret part of the soul*". The expression used by De La Salle underscores the character of the **active exercise** which hold the interest and energy of the entire person and not just part of the person. He differentiates, in a clear way, that other extensive prayer, which is carried out during the day and which is simultaneous with other daily occupations. The intensive prayer does not allow for simultaneity because it tends to hold the interest of the person: "**spirit**" (mind) and **heart**".

This is not a matter of ideas, reflections or reasoning "about God" although it sometimes mixes with another "emotion" once in a while when it is directed toward God; this is equivalent to maintaining "*simply in the spirit (understanding) or in the superficial part of the heart*". This will leave the soul in dryness and in emptiness of God" (EM 4). That is to say, a simple reflective activity, even though it is "about God", would not be the prayer of the Spirit in me and therefore would not be cause for the **encounter**, the "*filling me with God*" (cf. EM 140). Even at the beginning, when one begins on the road to prayer and needs to occupy the mind with numerous reflections, it is necessary, he says, "*that they largely be tender and emotional...*" (EM 114-115). That is to say, they are **words said to a friend** and not a dissertation about a theological topic.

In any case, this first movement proposes an **ascetic labor** whose principal goal is "*to keep the mind within itself and making it, therefore, interior*" (EM 10).

Second. A prayer that is from the Spirit:

In the form of a refrain EM keeps repeating beginning with number 14 what De La Salle understands is the best way - or the only one - of interiorizing the presence of God, praying about the "Mysteries, Virtues and Maxims" of Our Lord Jesus Christ:

*"By a sense of faith,
founded on some passage of Holy Scripture".*

Now then: the prayer of the Spirit within me produces, precisely through these two combined elements: **the "spirit of faith" and the Word of God**. The well achieved synthesis of the two is what De La Salle calls "**a simple interior view of faith**" which is given in prayer by "*simple attention*" or contemplation.

- "Sense of faith": This should not be confused with sentimentalism nor with simple manifestations of affectivity. It is the expression of the **will** of the inner part of the person (of the "*inner part of the heart*") that is directed toward God. It is a product of the **will** ("I want", "I have decided") and of

love ("I love you").

It is an **impulse** that is raised up by the Holy Spirit and that is made conscious in the person by the cooperation of "spirit" (mind...) and "heart"; or, better still, because the "spirit" puts itself at the service of the heart in order to express what the heart feels.

- The "feelings of faith" are very deep experiences that are not equated to emotions but are able to be expressed as "affections". Feelings and affections are related to "*aspirations*" and "*inexpressible sighs of the Spirit*" which pray in our innermost being (Romans 8:26-27). The Founder invites us to give thanks to God for them, conscious that, if they have come forth in our prayer, they are not mine, not a product of ours, but of the Spirit (cf. EM 335).

– But there is a guarantee for that "denomination of origin": the feelings of faith are supported by the **Word of God**. With the Word the rationalistic and self-sufficient monologue and easy sentimentality are avoided. Above all, recourse to the Word makes us become dependent on the voice of the Spirit, the "objective" voice which then stirs up the feeling of faith made more or less explicit in affectations, or simply reduced to "*an interior view of lively and respectful faith*" (EM 210).

Third. Synthesis: a relationship of love.

The synthesis of the two previous movements is posed from the beginning of EM as a **goal** to be attained but also as a **process that is ongoing from the beginning**: "*To become filled with God and interiorly united to Him*". This is the expression of a **falling in love** and, as such, "ideas" are not developed but the interpersonal relationship that is translated into affectivity: reaching out to the loved one.

- From the point of view of this falling in love one can understand and adequately appreciate that extreme language that characterizes that of the mystics: all is valued in the presence of the beloved and everything else is "Nothing". But also, and this is the test of the true mystic, everything acquires a new light when seen with that "*view of faith*": because everything reminds him of the Beloved: "*Since she found everything in God, she had the happiness of finding God in everything*" (Meditation 177.3), as De La Salle says about Saint Teresa.

The falling in love translates into a decentering that does not eliminate one's own identity, but values it as an action and a gift from God. Like Mary: "*She admired interiorly what God had done in her*" (Meditation 163.3).

7. PRAYING OUR MYSTERY IN THAT OF JESUS

Among the various tensions which, within Lasallian spirituality, lead us to center ourselves in Christ, I would like to focus on this one, though briefly.

- The concern of the Founder is made manifest in terms of leading his Brothers to live the Mystery of Christ from within, here and now (to "*live the spirit of the Mystery*"). The theological principle from which it derives is this: The Mystery of Jesus "takes flesh" today in us, his followers and also his ministers; the Mystery of Jesus reaches our disciples through us. We are a **real presence** of Christ the Savior on earth today (cf. Meditation 195).

De La Salle transforms this "theological principle" into a **dynamic principle**: this will be the tension that gives life to our ministry. But it is a tension that begins in prayer as a **fruit of the presence of Jesus** in the *ministerial community* (cf. EM 34).

- With this perspective the dilemma no longer has any meaning: "*Pray over the Mystery of Jesus or pray over our life?*" Prayer is the **point of convergence**: we contemplate the **saving action of the Son of God** sent to mankind and, as a response, **our ministerial action** that saves those to whom we have been sent. This tension in prayer is reflected in life: *How to "be Christ" before men, being a simple man myself?* And the synthesis occurs in the **ministerial consciousness of living the mystery of Jesus Christ**, who saves through our poor selves as simple instruments in the work of God; this theme is developed by De La Salle in the Meditations for the Time of Retreat.

- In this dynamic created by De La Salle, it is impossible to separate the EM from the Meditations, especially from those for the time of Retreat (and the Guide for Schools as well): all point in the same direction. What the Brother captures "for himself" in praying over these mysteries later translates into that which he should be living with his disciples in the Meditations for the Time of Retreat. They are two "**moments**" of strength that are found in the *prayer-life* tension.

(1) Cf. Pedro M. Gil, "*Tres siglos de identidad lasaliana: La relación Misión-Espiritualidad a lo largo de la historia FSC*". Rome, 1994. (pp. 46-60; 89-101).

(2) Cf. CL 50, pp. 187-193. Spanish translation, 15-21.

(3) See the meaning of these expressions in CL 50 pp 178-183; Spanish translation, especially 7-11.