

**A reading guide to the "Complete Works":
MD: MEDITATIONS FOR ALL
THE SUNDAYS OF THE YEAR (1/2)**

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With the "meditations" - short texts in three points consisting of considerations ending by an appeal to the reader to take action - we come to a **rather special literary style**. It is not what one would expect of an introduction to mental prayer. This was felt to be true at the time these meditations were published. The *Introduction* to the MR has the following to say: "They are composed in a style more suited to instruction, exhortation and establishing rules than to meditation: they contain no aspirations, affective expressions or resolutions" which ought to be made in mental prayer. The *Introduction* goes on to explain: "This will no longer appear surprising when it is realised that the pious writer did this intentionally ...He had already done so by providing [the Brothers] with a method showing the way they ought to make Mental Prayer". There are, therefore, certain questions we need to ask about these meditations: How are they related to the lives of the Brothers? Which other texts do they presume the Brothers know?

The MR consists of a self-contained group of 16 meditations for the time of the annual retreat. The MD and the MF (Meditations for Sundays and Meditations for Feasts), on the contrary, follow the liturgical seasons in a manner that is not exhaustive, and without making clear how these meditations are connected.

1. The MD in the lives of the first Brothers

In the so-called 1705 edition of the *Common Rules*, we read that after evening prayers in community, "the subject for the meditation of the following day will be read" (Cf. RC 27, 36). The 1718 edition adds that the following morning "the subject for meditation will be read" (RC 27, 7). We do not know **what text was read out loud** in the lifetime of the Founder, but we can suppose that, on any day for which there existed a meditation written by De La Salle, it would be that meditation that was read. In fact, the *Foreword* of the MD-MF speaks of "all who have the happiness and advantage of reading or hearing these holy instructions read". It is difficult to see when, apart from the beginning of mental prayer, it would have been possible to "hear the meditations of the Founder read". As for the weekly community meeting, there were too few of these to fit in the 200 or so meditations.

The 77 MD follow the *liturgical* cycles and include 53 meditations for Sundays and 24 for mobile feasts, which move according as the date of Easter moves. So the title of the work is not wholly appropriate. The Brothers come across these liturgical seasons and these feasts in the **catechism lessons** they prepare and give to their pupils (DC 40-42). The MD presuppose also a knowledge of points connected with the sacrament of Penance (DB 3,9 and I.2).

The "reading of these meditations can cause some surprise because of the **few references made to school**. Apart from

meditations 2 and 3, and the references in 6 and 7, the first mention of «employment» after that occurs in 33 and 37. It should be remembered that the «state» of the Brother always includes his apostolate in school. When De La Salle wrote these meditations, the Brothers had already reflected over the course of many years on the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, which deal exclusively with the school ministry. All the same, it may seem surprising that there is no mention of it in the meditation for Ash Wednesday (MD 16) when he speaks of «all your conduct» (MD 16, 2). And then unexpectedly, in the period between the Ascension and Pentecost, the instruction of children is mentioned, (MD 41,3,2 and then 43, 44, 46, 47); the idea of the teacher being a «minister of God» fills all MD 56; and the ideas of MR 205-206 reappear in shortened form in MD 61, in which the Gospel of the day speaks of «rendering an account». (Saturnino Gallego, *San Juan Batista de La Salle*, II p. 31, quoted by Br Joseph Le Bars).

The MD, more than the other meditations, offer **small glimpses of community life** which, like those in the *Memoir on the Habit*, are not very flattering for the Brothers (see, for example, MD 73-77). One wonders sometimes whether a particular point refers to an identifiable event. A case in point is **MD 62.1.2**, which is based on the Gospel passage in which Jesus chases out the sellers from the Temple, saying that *his house is a house of prayer and that they had made it into a den of thieves*. The Founder concludes vehemently: "If, therefore, you have not given yourself completely to God, if you do not have frequent intercourse with him in prayer, if you teach only profane subjects to your pupils, if you do not make it your chief care to instruct them in the truths of religion, should you not be looked upon by God as a thief breaking into his house, and remaining there without his approval, since, instead of inculcating the Christian spirit into your pupils, as you should, you teach them only such things as are useful for this world?"

And after this dressing-down, no advice is given, no exhortation, as would normally be the case. The other two points are much calmer and seem to have been composed at some other time. On the other hand, **MD 77.2** seems to be a **natural follow-on**: the Gospel is the same, as is the vehement tone, and the reference to *thieves*. There is this difference, however: The subject of the verb is either *those who or they*. And there is that last line: *Beware lest such a misfortune befall you!* A comparison of the vocabulary shows that the texts are closely related. The use of *Huré's* 1709 New Testament and the reference to those who *steal the bread they eat and occupy the place of others* seem to be an allusion to the overcrowded novitiate during the famine (Blain 2.60) and a clarification for the "postulants" who showed little interest in the *Christian* education of young people.

From this example, we can see the usefulness of trying to discover **the conditions under which these meditations were composed**. Brother Joseph Le Bars has made a detailed examination of the three copies of the first edition that we possess, paying special attention to the work of the printer and the corrections that were made subsequently. The present article makes much use of this unpublished material in its attempt to give some idea of what the Founder's manuscript may have looked like.

2. The work of the printer/bookseller Machuel

Jean Baptiste Machuel of Rouen had entrusted **his son Sauveur** to St Yon because "his mind was deranged" and had provided a large sum of money so that he could be kept there as long as necessary (contract signed May 23rd 1726: *Lasallianum* N° 15, p. 77).

It was probably in 1730 that he published the *Meditations for all the Sundays of the Year, with the Gospels of all the Sundays*, by M Jean Baptiste de La Salle, Doctor in Theolo-

gy, *Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*. No date is given, no address, no errata, no permission or authorization. There follows the *Meditations for the Feasts of Saints*. The numbering of the meditations, introduced in 1882, makes the MF begin with St Andrew instead of the Circumcision, obscuring in this way the fact that the two cycles of meditations do not begin at the same time. In CL 12 we can see that the MD could be published independently of the "Second Part" which comprised MF and MA. We do not have any indication that this was ever done.

One can estimate how many copies of the first edition of the MD-MF were printed by the fact that **there was no second edition in the 18th century**, despite the fact the Institute had more than 120 communities at the time. Perhaps unbound copies were kept at St Yon and bound as the need arose. What would be a fair estimate of the copies printed exclusively for the Brothers? 150? Possibly the absence of the Institute seal meant that the printer reserved the right to cover the costs of printing by selling copies to other Communities. In the Archives there is a complete manuscript copy, once the property of a Sister, dated 1826, but probably not connected with the Langres edition (1816?).

The *foreword* of the first edition mentions the printing of the MR: the good reception given to this work has led the authorities of the Institute "to work with greater ardour and print also the Meditations that this holy Ecclesiastic has composed for the Sundays and principal Feasts of the year, contained in the two parts of this Book". The volume printed by Machuel and reproduced in CL 12 is certainly a single work, but what work is referred to regarding the preparation of the edition? What was the role of the editor in the publication of the MDF? To what extent were De La Salle's manuscripts ready for printing?

The way in which the Gospel for the four Sundays of Advent is printed is quite different from the way used in what follows. Perhaps the MD were not all "composed" at the printer's at the same time. It can be noted also that the translation of the Gospel pericope is different from the one used in the body of the meditation (see the beginning of the first 3 meditations). There are numerous printing errors. For example, the 2nd point of MD 5 and the 3rd of MD 24 are not indicated. The use of brackets is inappropriate at times. For example: Jesus "said to the Blessed Virgin his Mother (that his time), that is to say, the time to perform this miracle, had not yet come" (MD 8.3.1). The following way of indicating the gloss would have been better: "that his time (that is to say, the time to perform this miracle) had not yet come. We can conclude, therefore, that not enough care was taken over the correction of the proofs of the MD.

3. Almost a text that could not be altered

CL 12 shows signs of corrections made after printing. For example, *we* (nous) is replaced by *you* (vous) (p. 98): "you are given patched or worn clothing...Nothing of all this will disturb your interior peace" (MD 31.2.1). There are some clumsy attempts at correction in the manuscript. We find, for example on page 40 "car se cerait" [instead of *ce serait*] (MD 10.2.2). The same mistake appears in all 3 copies. On page 28 of one of the copies there is a correction in faint ink which replaces *est* incorrectly by *mest* (MD 7.2.2). Blain (2.430) makes some minor corrections in MD 7.1. On page 201 of two of the copies of the book we find: "you are bound to be a model of innocence and terror for your Brothers" (MD 69.2.2). In the 3rd copy, *terror* has been changed to *fer-vour*.

I leave it to the reader's curiosity to discover further corrections. Brother Joseph Le Bars draws the following tentative conclusions: "It is somewhat surprising to find that certain

mistakes, corrected in one or other or in all three copies of the 1730 edition, were not corrected in the 1816 Langres edition. From this we can conclude that not all the copies of the first edition were corrected, and that there was no [systematic] correction at the printer's".

Many other mistakes were not corrected. Brother Joseph continues: "It is unthinkable that the Brothers were not aware of these mistakes. The fact they made no alterations to the printed book is to some degree understandable, even though some mistakes were quite unsightly. If the printer at Langres did not correct them in 1816, he must have been told to re-print the text as it stood. It is not too surprising, at a time when the Institute was being re-established, to find a certain concern to keep the Founder's texts intact.

"It would seem, therefore, that this edition was distributed with its mistakes uncorrected. Was the reason for this, as Brother Irlide maintains in his preface of 1882, that the author was not able to correct the proofs of his work at the printer's? The two other series of meditations, for Feasts and for the time of Retreat, seem to contain fewer mistakes.

"The conclusion one could draw from this is that the MD was prepared for printing towards the end of the Founder's life. This view is supported, on the one hand, by what the biographers say, and on the other, by Brother Timothée. What else except death could have prevented the Founder from correcting them? At the same time, it is not inconceivable that the first Brothers considered the last work written in the hand of the Founder to be sacrosanct and that therefore it could not be altered. We should remember that there was a gap of more than ten years between the death of the Founder and the publication of the work" (p. 40-41).

4. Some passages difficult to understand

Correcting the mistakes in the first edition is a delicate process. Even today, there are certain passages in the *Complete Works* which are not comprehensible at a first reading.

"God, in fact, being infinitely above all created things, our life, such as it is, does not deserve any consideration from us if we compare it with that of its Author" (MD 70.2.1). This is a correction of the text found in CL 12 which has: "all created things, such as is our life, does not deserve..." (p. 205). A comparison with MF 169.1.1 makes the meaning of the text clear: *such as is our life* does not have the moral judgment of *our life, such as it is*. This is a metaphysical point of view: "our life, which is something created has no worth of its own (but only through its participation in the life of its Author) and therefore does not deserve from us any consideration if we compare it with his".

The end of MD 9 has two versions: "He who acts from a motive of reason acts as a mere man, not as a disciple docile to the voice of Christ, who should guide him always through the spirit of faith" or "who should be guided", according as one thinks of Christ as guiding the disciple, or of the disciple as guiding himself through the spirit of faith.

Some obvious mistakes have been corrected in a number of different ways in successive editions. "The great power which he will exceed (excédéra) when he comes to judge all men" (MD 1.1.1) has been replaced by *display* or *exercise*, which is closer graphically. "Guilty of obedience to God" (MD 10.2.2) should probably be "guilty of disobedience". And "to speak uncertainly to a Superior" is more likely to be *sincerely*.

We have said enough about the sequel of Machuel's edition. Let us now turn to what preceded it.

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