

**ST JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE  
MEDITATIONS ON PRAYER  
I - Med 36th:  
The necessity of prayer**

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St. John Baptist de La Salle dealt often with the subject of prayer and one cannot deal with this topic without referring to his treatise on prayer that occupies one-sixth of the *Duties of a Christian*, pages 405 to 494 of CL 20, in the complete works of Duties, Part A, 401, 402 ff. My intention here is to study the series of Meditations for Sundays that deal with this topic. They are Meditations 36-39, which include some suggestions for rogation days. There are actually four consecutive meditations dealing with prayer.

The first one, number 36, corresponds to the 5th Sunday after Easter and it is entitled "The need for prayer". This title is also found in *The Duties*, part I, DA 401, 402ff. It recalls Meditation 7, the first one about obedience, "Of the need for obedience", that seems to be the beginning of a series.

This Meditation 36 is made up of 57 lines in three points composed of 21, 21 and 15 lines respectively. It begins with a quotation from the Gospel of the day, "Ask and you shall receive".

A study of the vocabulary of this meditation shows that the most frequently used word in it is "prayer", which occurs 10 times. The pronouns "we", "one" and "you" are used 24, 1, and 18 times respectively.

The frequent use of "we" shows that the writer identifies with his readers and is not content simply to preach to them.

The Founder quotes also from St Augustine and St John Chrysostom. He quotes from these two saints even more extensively in his treatise on prayer in the *Duties* (DA 401.2 and 401.3). Certain expressions found in this work occur also in the meditation. They are highlighted in this article.

MD 36, therefore, is entitled "On the Necessity of Prayer". We cannot be certain that this title originates with the Founder. Perhaps it does, since we find the same title in DA. It is possible, of course, that it was someone else who transferred the title to the meditation. The word "necessity" does not occur in the text of the meditation, nor even in DA 401.2. The word "necessary" occurs once in MD 36, but it is used to stress the need for mortification in order to "overcome the impure spirit". The necessity of prayer is reiterated innumerable times throughout the text, beginning with the opening lines: "As we need God's grace, we should ask for it".

#### First point

Since these are the opening lines, there is no lead-up to the statement "as we need God's grace". The *Duties* speak of this necessity more clearly and at greater length, especially at

the beginning of the treatise on prayer (DA 400 f or CL 20, p. 405 ff), and more particularly in DA 402 f. This seems to imply that the Founder presumed the Brothers knew this work.

He continues: "God, wishing to give us his assistance, has provided us with a certain means of obtaining it". These words remind us of what he says in MR 193.3.1: "[God] cannot truly desire this without providing the necessary means" as well as in the *Duties*: "it is an important fact that God gave you one other means apart from the sacraments". It is a recurring theme in the Founder's writings that the will of God cannot be fulfilled without his intervention and, consequently, without his doing himself what needs to be done.

In the case of salvation: "It was necessary that God himself, through Jesus Christ Our Lord, should show us the road we were to follow, and to inspire us with the desire of walking" (MD 3.3).

In the case of obedience, if it is difficult "God must give you the power to carry it into effect" (MD 10.3).

Regarding individual actions: "I do not like to make the first move... I leave it to Divine Providence to make the first move" (LA 18.17).

"This means [prayer] is all the easier to employ as it is ever at our disposal, and we may use it whenever we so desire". This idea is phrased somewhat differently in DA p. 406. The highlighted words appear also in this latter text.

And then everything becomes easier. To show that this is true, the Founder has recourse to St Augustine: "Hence, St Augustine, to make us understand the facility with which we can do good, says: "If you are unable to act, either from weakness or by reason of the violence of temptation, or on account of any other cause, you should have recourse to prayer. Therein you will infallibly find power to accomplish that which is above your natural strength". The source of the quotation has not yet been discovered. It is difficult to see where the quotation ends and where the words of the Founder begin. It is clearly the Founder speaking when we come to the words: "When you experience difficulty in practising virtue, you should endeavour to regain facility by prayer. Apply yourself thereto promptly, remembering the words of Our Lord: Ask and you shall receive".

This is somewhat daring on the Founder's part, because in other circumstances he does not hesitate to point out that it is not easy to do good, and requires "great courage" from us (MD 70.1.1). Elsewhere he urges us "to embrace the practice of some virtue for which we have the greatest repugnance". In order to do this, he tells us to ask Our Lord "to perform some miracle of grace on our behalf" (MF 141.2.2).

After all that the Founder says about the efficacy of prayer, the following reference to St Augustine in MF 123.1.1 for the feast of his conversion (May 5th) seems a little puzzling: "[he] paid no heed to the promptings of grace, though he did not always resist them. He constantly hesitated, now willing now unwilling, to follow the call of God".

The first point is punctuated by the expression: "we should".

This idea of obligation recurs frequently in De La Salle's writings. The relevant verbs are used more than 3,200 times.

This first point begins with the pronoun "we". This is frequently the case when the Founder speaks of things that concern him also, and especially when quotations from the Scriptures are involved.

Some of the expressions he uses can be found also in *Duties* 1 (DA 1): "as we need God's grace, we should ask for it".

The use of the pronoun "you" in the quotation attributed to St Augustine seems to have prompted the Founder to follow suit, and to continue doing so in the second point, but not for long.

## 2nd point

We may be somewhat surprised to find the 2nd point starting with the words: *"That which provides the most powerful stimulus to prayer is the state of weakness to which sin has reduced you"*. We discover eventually, however, that De La Salle is following the plan proposed in the quotation from St Augustine in point 1: *"If you are unable to act, either from weakness or by reason of the violence of temptation..."*. Weakness and temptation are the subject of the 2nd and 3rd points.

The writer himself suffers from this human weakness caused by sin and, first of all, original sin. It is surprising to find that "we" is not used till the second part of the sentence. Perhaps the use of "you" in the first part is due to an error on the part of the printer. The writer recognises the fact he is sinful, and in MD 1.2.2 declares: "Who among us will not tremble at the thought of the last judgment?" And later in MD 1.3.2 he says: "who acquit ourselves so carelessly of our duty".

It is quite natural, therefore, that he uses "we" in his paraphrase of the quotation from St Chrysostom: *"It is a divine medicine which purges the heart of all evil and fills it with righteousness. If, therefore, we really desire to be freed from sin, we cannot do better than apply ourselves to prayer. Indeed, however great the number of sins a person has committed, provided that such a one retains a love of prayer, he will find in this exercise a prompt and easy remedy to obtain the grace of penance and pardon"* (MD 36.2).

[In the French text] the inclusion of this quotation is a little surprising because it begins by "elle" (it), and it needs great imagination to see that what it refers to is "prayer". [Still in the French text], the word "prayer" is not used in the first lines of the 2nd point, and you have to go back 10 lines to the end of point 1 to find it. Moreover, the two sentences which occur also in the *Duties*, and which are highlighted here, are arranged in a different order. In fact, it is the text found in the *Duties* that agrees with the authentic original text. What follows is a quotation from a translation made by the Abbé Bareille in 1866 (Complete Works, Homily on Prayer). Another translation dating back to 1690 is less suitable for our purpose.

"I wish to show you briefly that even if we were covered in sin, prayer would purify us of it immediately. In the light of this, what is more noble, what is more divine than prayer, since it is a sovereign remedy for all the illnesses of the soul? In the first place, we see the Ninevites who are delivered by prayer from their innumerable crimes against God. As prayer entered their hearts, justice entered also".

We can understand the reasoning of De La Salle. He makes no mention of the Ninevites used as an example by St Chrysostom. Incidentally, the Ninevites are mentioned in DA 401.3.5. All the other ideas are there, and the inclusion of some words is even surprising. Perhaps the highlighted part was borrowed from a translation. It would be interesting to discover the exact source.

[In the French text], the word "oraison" (mental prayer) needs some comment. It should be noted that this word is sometimes used to mean "prayer" and at other times "mental prayer". The latter meaning is the one most frequently encountered in the MD. In the present text, however, it would seem that the first meaning is the one intended.

The final exhortation of the 2nd point uses "you", as is most frequently the case.

*"Ask God, therefore, to grant you to be pure of heart, holding in detestation and horror not only the greatest sins, but also anything whatsoever that may sully your conscience and render you displeasing to God"*.

We find the almost inevitable use of "therefore" indicating that the writer intends to demonstrate a point. The reference to the detestation and horror for sin and for anything that resembles it is a commonplace in De La Salle's writings. We can be quite sure, therefore, that he wrote this paragraph. What is surprising, however, is his use of "ternir" (sully) which occurs only twice in the entire Lasallian Vocabulary.

## 3rd point

The 3rd point then begins by *"We are so subject to temptation that Job exclaims: «What is man's life on earth but a campaigning.» And St Peter adds that «the devil who is your enemy, goes about roaring like a lion, to find his prey»"*. It is rather an abrupt beginning, but it fits in with the plan found in the quotation from St Augustine.

The two quotations, one from Job and the other from St Peter, which are used together here, are found also elsewhere. The first is in MD 17.2.1 which has the title "On temptation", where we read: *"«man's life on earth is but a campaigning», or, as the Vugate renders it, a «continual struggle»"*. The quotation seems to be borrowed from a letter from St Jerome to Demetrius, in which he refers to Job 7.1. In the context of MD 17, temptation is considered more as a trial sent by God and therefore beneficial. In MD 36, however, the case is quite the contrary, for the text makes things quite clear: *"we are so subject to temptation that..the devil who is your enemy, goes around roaring like a lion"*.

The second quotation from 1 P 5,8 can be found also in MD 72.3.1, where it speaks of: "the violent temptations with which those who live in community are assailed by the devil...he goes about roaring like a lion, to find his prey". In this meditation, De La Salle condemns a sort of complicity between those of the "chosen ones" who "try to conduct themselves, and who fail to seek the direction of their Superiors" and the devil. Here also, temptation is seen as the work of the devil.

*"Prayer enables us to resist him. With regard to the demon of impurity, Our Lord even says: «There is no way of casting out such spirits as this except by prayer and fasting.» Thus he mentions prayer before fasting, from which we are to conclude that, though mortification is very important if we would overcome the impure spirit, still it is of greater importance that we should have recourse to prayer whenever we feel ourselves attacked"* (MD 36.3).

This other quotation from Mt 17,21, which is highlighted, is found also in DA 401.2.11 and there is an echo of it in MD 66.1.1, where we read: "There is no way of casting out such spirits as this except by prayer and fasting".

These scriptural references seem to have been used regularly by the Founder, as were also the topics which they serve to illustrate.

Then there follows the exhortation, including, as before, the word "therefore": *"Whenever you feel tempted, therefore, do not cease praying until you have chased the wicked spirit far from you"*.

The invitation to "never cease praying" can be found in a number of places in De La Salle's writings: MD 39.1.17, MD 39.2.23, MD 66.1.28 etc. Such insistence underscores his conviction concerning the need and effectiveness of prayer that is first of all the result of faith and then one's own experience. The Founder wants to communicate that same conviction to us. •