

**Reading Guide to the Complete Works
MR: Meditations for the Time of Retreat**

Brother Alain Houry

"St La Salle's acquaintance with St Paul's mission and writings convinced him that the profession of the Christian teacher was a ministry to the young, the more deprived especially. It was comparable with Paul's ministry and relationship with the young Christian communities, to which he had given birth through his preaching, and whose development he followed with intense solicitude and affection.

"When in the last years of his life he brought together his insights and the results of the experience of the Brother-teachers he had founded, De La Salle presented them in the form of "Meditations" for their annual retreat during the summer vacation. And not only for them, but, as he expressed it in his title: *«For the use of all persons who are engaged in the education of youth»*. These meditations are in pairs: one gives the theological basis and inspiration of the teaching ministry, taken largely from St Paul, while the other, looking at broad objectives in the same spirit, was read and made the subject of a talk or an exchange.[...]

"His Brothers, who read from the New Testament every day, would see the wider context of the Epistles from which the quotations were taken, and De La Salle must have often spoken on and discussed with them the parallel between Paul's work and theirs. It helps, in order to see fully what our Patron is saying, to see the fuller text that inspired him and to have in mind some idea of the Apostle's own ministry and the tenor of his letters. [...]

"De La Salle writes as someone speaking to his readers - in the case of his Brothers, to people well known. These pages did not originate from theory; there are no literary words or conscious forms of speech. He writes from experience and from the heart. He must have written some of these pages in his last years when he was often ill. He seems to have intended these meditations to be printed and published, since he has in view educators of the young generally. This was done only ten years or so after his death. [...]

"Although he spoke from the heart, he did not consign his ideas to paper as they came to him. Each meditation falls into three sections, and each section follows as far as possible the planning style - the chiasma or X-form plan - of the rhetoric of the day that he had learnt at college. The thought proceeds from an underlying truth to more defined considerations, leading to the central thought, then fans out once more, presenting the original convictions in inverse order, but now charged with the central truth".

The text quoted above is taken from the most recent presentation of the MR, the work of the English Brother Alfred Calcutt, which is entitled: *"You light a candle" (Ministry and spirituality of the Christian teacher according to the writings of St J.B. de La Salle, Patron of Teachers)*, September 1996. The present article uses also a work in French by Brother Jean Louis Schneider, entitled: *"Chercheurs de Dieu avec Jean Baptiste de La Salle" (cahier IV: les MR ou l'expérience de la prière ministérielle)*, 1994.

De La Salle re-interprets his life in the light of salvation history

Unlike the other meditations, the MR form a tightly structured work, and so it is important to recognise the underlying plan. There is, in fact, a choice of plans: Brother Patrice Marey identified the main actors: God, Christ, the Church, the teachers, the children, etc). What I think is most productive, however, is to identify its chiasma structure, and see in it "a kind of account, with a beginning: the world as it is; and an end: the world transformed and saved. It is the account of the journey of the children and the Brothers, from a world wounded by Evil to the Promised Land, where a new world can appear, thanks to all the efforts made on the way" (J.L.Schneider).

MR 193-194	Reality and dreams: going towards the Promised Land	MR 207-208
MR 195-196	Responsible for the mission of salvation	MR 205-206
MR 197-198	The mission of salvation and conflicts	MR 203-204
MR 199-200	Constructing the Church	MR 201-202

Brother Alfred illustrates the chiasma planning style (as well as inclusion) by analysing the underlying structure of MR 193,3:

The plan of salvation

Not only does God will that everyone come to the knowledge of truth, but he wants everyone to be saved [1 Tim 2,4]. He cannot truly desire this without providing the necessary means, without giving children the teachers who will assist them in the fulfilment of his plan

God's field

St Paul says that God has a field which he cultivates, a building which he is constructing, that he has chosen you to help in this work by announcing to children the Gospel of his Son [1 Co 3,9] and the truths that are contained in it.

The words of reconciliation

This is why you must glory in your ministry and keep trying to save some of these children [Rm 11,13-14]. According to the expression of St Paul, God has made you his ministers in order to reconcile others to him. He has entrusted to you the message of reconciliation for these children.

Announce the Gospel

Appeal to them as if God were appealing through you, for you have been destined to cultivate these young plants by announcing to them the truths of the Gospel [2 Co 5,18-20]. Provide them with the means of salvation appropriate to their development.

Not with clever words

Teach them without using clever words, lest the cross of Christ, source of our sanctification, become void of meaning [1 Co 1,17]: nothing you say would produce any fruit in their minds or hearts.

The field of God

For these children are simple and for the most part poorly brought up. Those who help them to save themselves must speak simply, so that every word will be clear and easy to understand.

The plan of salvation

Be faithful to this in order to do as much as you are able and as God requires of you for the salvation of those whom he has entrusted to you.

The MR in De La Salle's writings

A very profitable way of reading the MR would be to do so with the help of the excellent presentation produced in 1976 by Brother Miguel Campos for the edition of the 40th General Chapter:

"Since the meditations form a work which is tightly structured, it would be a mistake to read them as an historical treatise or as a theological synthesis. It is simply a collection of *meditations and it is for the time of retreat*. [...] As meditations, they are not written in order to give reasons, to convince the Brothers of the importance of their ministry, or to remind them of the truths of Revelation: they are written to encourage prayer. [...]

"These meditations:

1. are inseparable from the way of life chosen by De La Salle himself under the influence of the Gospel, his story;
2. they are a call to the Brother to express his own life, his own story;
3. they are a celebration of the mystery of God's love;
4. they throw the light of Scripture on the way of life of the Brothers in radical relation to the work of God, visible in action, in history" (pp. 10-14).

It is worth noting how unusual the MR are by comparison with the other so-called "spiritual" writings of the Founder to which they belong: a whole section of the Brother's life is missing. Such usual terms as "community", "society", "obedience", the "Virgin" or "Mary" are nowhere to be found in the MR. The wish to address a wider public than just the Brothers has caused a certain type of vocabulary to more or less disappear from the MR. Exceptions to this are the titles of 4 meditations and MR 208,2: "Oh, what joy a Brother of the Christian Schools will have when he sees a great number of his students in possession of eternal happiness, for which they are indebted to him by the grace of Jesus Christ!". This is a rare example of lyricism in meditations normally composed "much more in a didactic, exhortatory and directive style than in a style suited to meditations" (Preface). The author of this Preface refers explicitly to the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer* to justify this style in this instance.

The overall theme of the "ministry", then, is treated without reference to the consecrated life of the Brothers. This makes these meditations more accessible to those who, as teachers and educators, share in Christ's saving mission while following their own vocations. However, the frequent references to Scripture require at least a basic knowledge of the letters of St Paul, not to understand the Founder in the light of St Paul, but in order to see how St Paul's experience throws light on that of the Founder, the first Brothers and our own. •