

**THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH  
in the WRITINGS of DE LA SALLE (1/2)**

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From the very beginning it should be noted just who in this article merits the title of Father of the Church. It is common to recognize authors of the first Christian writings as Fathers of the Church. The root cause of this impropriety has its origin in the idea that in ancient times the word "father" was applied to "teacher" in relation to his disciple or, in general, to persons he instructed. There are many examples of this theory.

St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians writes: "For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel" (1 Corinthians 4:15). For his part, Clement of Alexandria graphically affirms: "words are 'children' of the soul...Therefore we call those who have instructed us "fathers"...and all that has been taught is, in terms of its relationship, the "child" of its teacher".

What criteria will enable us to distinguish between the Fathers of the Church in the strict sense and the writers or sacred doctors of the first centuries? We can summarize four conditions that define a sacred writer as a Father of the Church: orthodoxy of doctrine, holiness of life, church approval and antiquity. Then it is important to distinguish between the Fathers of the Church and the Doctors of the Church: several of this latter category might lack the characteristic of antiquity although they may possess the other three.

Along these lines, Pope Boniface VIII stated that he wanted St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, St. Gregory the Great and St. Jerome, known as Fathers of the Latin Church, to be considered as *egregii doctores Ecclesiae*, to use the Latin expression. The same Church venerates another four Fathers of the Greek Church: St. Athanasius, St. Basil the Great, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Gregory Nazianzen. And to this group of eight Fathers of the Church, called major, we can add others that fulfill the four requirements mentioned above; for example, St. Ambrose, St. Cyprian, St. Cyril, St. Gregory Nicene, St. Epiphanius, St. Leo the Great...all of these are cited in Duties of the Christian I.

**De La Salle and the Fathers of the Church**

In the Meditations for the Principal Feasts of the year De La Salle shows clearly the knowledge, devotion and veneration that he feels for the Fathers of the Church. It can also be surmised that he also felt a sense of support for the origins and early beginnings of the Church judging from the frequent recourse that De La Salle makes of these. It is logical to assume, then, that De La Salle nurtures his faith in the sources of Sacred Scripture and in Tradition.

De La Salle offers for consideration by the Brothers the witness of the life and the virtues of "eleven" of the aforementioned Fathers in several meditations. By way of illustration, I think it would be appropriate to list the names of the Fathers in question, in order of their appearance: St. John Chrysostom, Pope St. Gregory, Pope St. Leo, St. Athanasius, the Conversion of St. Augustine, St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. Basil, St. Cassian, St. Augustine, St. Cyprian, St. Jerome and St. Ambrose.

The format for these meditations is the same as for other saints. There are three points. In the first point, De La Salle offers a brief description of the saint. The other two points contain examples and at the end of each there is always a concrete application aimed at the Brothers. Both the exhortative and moralizing style of these meditations and the necessary brevity of the text afford at invitation to contemplate the life and example of the saint rather than to expound on the saint's thinking. So the Meditations have relatively little space for convincing arguments concerning the doctrine and ministry of the Fathers, in spite of the number of pages that are devoted exclusively to them. This is indeed proof of the esteem and appreciation that De La Salle had for the Fathers of the Church, the pillars of his own faith and teaching.

**The Fathers of the Church in the written works of De La Salle.**

The frequency with which an author is cited in a text, either explicitly or implicitly, shows the influence that this author might have in the particular text. One may object, and rightly so, that the quality of the contribution should also be kept in mind here. It is not my intention to digress now and make an evaluation of the nature of these contributions, but simply to list the times in which some of De La Salle's works have found their inspiration in the Fathers of the Church. These numbers speak for themselves:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
St. Augustine	51	1		1	1	11	12						
St. Ambrose	18					3	5				3		
St. Athanasius													
St. Basil	2						2						
St. Cassian									2	2			
St. Cyprian	10		1				1					1	
St. J. Chrysostom	35		1			3	1			1			
St. Gregory Naz.	6		2			2	4						
St. Gregory the Gr.													
St. Jerome	5					9	5	1					
St. Leo the Great	1					1	2						1
St. Cyril	4							1					
Holy Fathers	21		1		2	3	1				2		1
<b>Total</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
1. Duties I							8. Meditations for T. Retreat						
2. Duties II							9. Collection						
3. Duties III							10. Rule						
4. Summary							11. Rules of Christian D.						
5. Instructions							12. Letters						
6. Meditations for Sundays							13. Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer						
7. Meditations for Feasts													

**Conclusion**

1<sup>st</sup>. The Duties of a Christian Part I and the Meditations are the writings of De La Salle in which mention is most frequently made of the Fathers of the Church in order to support his teaching.  
2<sup>nd</sup>. The presence of the Fathers of the Church in Duties of

a Christian Part I far exceeds the sum total of the other works of De La Salle.

3<sup>rd</sup>. The contribution of the Fathers of the Church in Duties of a Christian Part I proves the authorship and originality of John Baptist de La Salle.

**The Fathers of the Church in Duties of a Christian Part I**

The numbers in the preceding table show that De La Salle's Duties of a Christian Part I is the work in which the Fathers of the Church contribute most to the work of the author. We turn our interest now to understand the "how" and the "what" these Fathers of the Church contribute to what is contained in Duties of a Christian Part I.

**The how**

As I ask myself how, I try to respond to the type of literary form that Duties of a Christian Part I uses in its text in terms of the interventions of the Fathers of the Church. I will make reference to four types: the quotation, the simple reference to a Father or to the Fathers of the Church, indirect style and the symbiosis between the Father of the Church and the author of Duties of a Christian Part I.

1. The *quotation* or direct style does not appear even once in the 504 pages of the Duties of a Christian Part I. No doubt this is due to the common practice of that era to plagiarize, completely omitting the source. The only direct quotations in the Duties of a Christian Part I are the few taken from Scripture - and there are not many of those.

2. The *simple reference* to a Father of the Church. There are many times when the author of Duties of a Christian Part I will plainly cite the name of the Father of the Church or even refer to it in a generic way. In the explanation of the Our Father, we read: "As Tertullian and St. Augustine did" (page 444). Referring to the places and times for prayer, he writes: "This has been the customary Church practice on days of penance, as St. Ambrose attests" (page 439). In quite a few places the authority of the Fathers of the Church in general is invoked: "In the sacrament of Penance, satisfaction has always been the most recommended by the Holy Fathers" (page 325). After explaining the different names attributed to the Eucharist, he concludes: "The Holy Fathers have given some more names" (page 244).

3. The *indirect style*. This differs from the direct style in that it is not literal in the words used in the quotation. Grammatically, there are no colons or quotation marks, there is some reliance on verbs such as "to say" or "to affirm"...This is a way of plagiarizing with impunity. This method of making free use of sources is very common in the Duties of a Christian Part I, especially in the section dealing with Prayer. Entire pages of this section are composed of indirect quotations from the Fathers of the Church.

When he expounds on for whom we should and can pray: "St. Augustine 'says' that as we have been his companions in vice, so we should be his companions in piety" (page 454). "St. Jerome 'says' that we should pray continually for the spread of the Church" (page 454). "Tertullian 'says' that since the beginning of the Church Christians have prayed for those in authority" (page 454). "The first Christians, St. Jerome 'says', prayed for St. Peter and St. Paul" (page 454).

4. *Symbiosis* between the Father of the Church and the author of Duties of a Christian Part I. There are also many pages in the Duties of a Christian Part I in which the thinking of De La Salle and the Father of the Church are intert-

wined in such away that they form a harmonious and original discourse. This of course is the result of the complete mastery that De La Salle had of his sources. For the sake of brevity I can only point out some pages, whose reading will serve to corroborate my assertion. They are pages 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422, 436, 437, 449 and 450 among others.

**What the Fathers of the Church contribute to Duties of a Christian Part I.**

In addition to knowing how De La Salle makes use of the Fathers of the Church it would also be interesting to know what parts of his teaching make use of their authority. I believe that numerical data represent the clearest and most convincing case in this regard; at least they will allow us to examine the issue more closely. So let us look at the four sections that make up Duties of a Christian Part I.

	1st part 1st section Creed	1st part 2nd section Commend.	2nd part 1st section Sacraments	2nd part 2nd section Prayer
Number of pages in the section	84	90	212	99
Number of times Fathers are cited	18	4	84	90
% of referring pages	0,183%	0,038%	0,396%	0,909%
% of referring section	11,99%	2,49%	25,95%	59,56%

A glance at this table clearly shows:

- a) that the presence of the Fathers of the Church is unequally distributed throughout Duties of a Christian Part I.
- b) that those items of a more spiritual and essential character are cited more often: Grace-Sacraments and Prayer.
- c) that among those, the topic of Prayer is by far the dominant one and it exceeds the other ones added together. Therefore I will limit my comments to this last issue but first I will offer some brief comments on the others.

The interventions of the Fathers of the Church in the first three sections of Duties of a Christian Part I take on a character which can be described as precise, demonstrative, authoritative or dealing in apologetics. And so the collective term "Holy Fathers" appears no less than twelve times with that type of meaning. "In reference to the substances of bread and wine in the belief of the Church and so the Holy Fathers in the beginning centuries have testified to us" (page 245). The testimony of the Holy Fathers is cited in a discussion of the Sacrament of Penance: "All the Holy Fathers affirm unanimously that Jesus Christ granted to the Apostles the power to forgive sins" (page 282). The only time the appellation "Fathers of the Church" is used in the section of Prayer, it is done as a type of guarantee: "The Fathers of the first centuries practiced the custom of explaining it - Sunday Prayer - often to the faithful" (page 443).

If we keep only to the term Fathers of the Church, we can say that its appearance in the first three sections has characteristics which are similar to those expressed for the Fathers in a generic sense. I will cite only three examples for the sake of brevity. On page three, he offers the testimony of St. Augustine as being in favor of the authority of the Church. "According to Tertullian, in the Church the celebration of the Eucharist followed the sacrament of Matrimony" (page 401). In ancient times Extreme Unction was administered before Viaticum, "as proven in the stories of St. Ambrose and St. John Chrysostom" (page 354).

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