

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

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The Fathers of the Church in the section on Prayer.

We have shown above how De La Salle incorporated a numerous list of Fathers of the Church in his Meditations for Feasts. This presupposed a certain knowledge of their teaching and virtues. It is natural to suppose that when De La Salle wrote about Prayer, he turned to sources that naturally fit in with his teaching: Sacred Scripture and the tradition of the first Fathers.

Of the four sections in Duties of a Christian Part I, the section on Prayer is the author's most original and personal contribution. The probable influence of Claude Joly and Le Coreur in the other sections are completely set aside here; furthermore, both of these sources have been surpassed. Very few catechisms of the period can compare with the Duties of a Christian Part I along these lines.

De La Salle's personality can be seen:

- a) in the rich spirituality that flows through the pages of the work like an abundant river: this is the Saint's trademark;
- b) in the clear, simple and adaptable methodology: this clearly has been written by a teacher;
- c) by the sense of immediacy and importance that prayer has in the daily life of the Christian: this is the experience of one who prays.
- d) in the fluency and mastery of the author in his use of fundamental sources: Sacred Scripture and Tradition: this reveals a man of faith.

Of the few writings of De La Salle that we do have we can be certain of their authenticity, including the one that we are now studying. The certain proof lies in the fact that in the section on Prayer there is unequivocal concurrence, sometimes literally so, with several others of his works: the Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer, the Meditations, the Instructions for Holy Mass, the Exercises of Piety that were practiced each day in class, the Conduct of Schools, to cite some of the most obvious examples.

What do the Fathers of the Church have to do with the preceding, one might ask? I would answer that they have a lot to do with this since it is they who structure, give life to and influence the text. Two basic questions will occupy our attention:

- a) the presence of the Fathers of the Church in Duties of a Christian Part I;
- b) the quality and manner of their presence.

Presence of the Fathers of the Church

We will examine the fifteen sections that make up Part I and we will point out the contributions made by the Fathers of the Church in each of them. Keep in mind the approximate value of the number of citations and their value since it is difficult to keep clear which citation belongs to which Father of the Church. I will not give the citation in its entirety, which could be lengthy, but only the basic title.

1st. *What is prayer.* 7 pages.

It is important to note that the text belongs in its entirety to the author. There is no citation here belonging to someone else. There are references to some of De La Salle's other works such as the Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer and the Exercises of Piety.

2nd. *The need for prayer.* 5 pages.

De La Salle primarily uses here the thought of St. John Chrysostom and, to a lesser degree, that of St. Augustine.

3rd. *Advantages of prayer.* 6 pages.

Using two texts of St. John Chrysostom as a starting point, De La Salle threads some substantial pages together using teaching from this Father of the Church as the connecting thread.

4th. *Conditions for prayer.* 11 pages.

This is one of the most extensive sections. Almost all of it is De La Salle's own work. Throughout this work he cites St. John Chrysostom twice and St. Cyprian, St. Jerome, St. Augustine and St. Ephram once each: while many names are cited, there is little of concrete substance from these men.

5th. *Places, times and posture in prayer.* 7 pages.

This section is inspired in the thought of St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine in 25% of the treatise. St. Ambrose, Tertullian, St. Basil and St. John Damascene are also cited in various places.

6th. *What can and should be asked for in prayer.* 10 pages.

This section includes an explanation of the Our Father or Sunday Prayer. Nearly 85% of this section owes its thought to that of St. Augustine. Tertullian thought accounts for another 7% and the rest corresponds to the section that De La Salle comments on and relates to the two commentators.

7th. *For whom we should and can pray.* 6 pages.

Here St. Augustine's thinking is contained in a good 50% of the section. In addition, some other Fathers are cited in short passages: St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. John Chrysostom and Tertullian.

8th. *We should direct our prayer to God and Jesus Christ.* 3. Pages.

Here De La Salle navigates in waters that are his very own and so there is no additional support needed other than that obtained by the Scriptures and the Church.

9th. *We should also direct our prayer to the Saints.* 3 pages.

Again the Scriptures and the Church are the major sources for this section and De La Salle's thinking covers some 95% of this part. There are two brief references to St. John Chrysostom, St. Bernard and Teodoro.

10th. *Explanation of the Hail Mary*. 4 pages.

This is 100% De La Salle-inspired. There are no quotations belonging to anyone else.

11th. *Different types of prayer*. 6 pages.

Here the citations of St. Cyprian, St. John Chrysostom and Cassian do not lessen De La Salle's originality in any way.

Of the four remaining sections, only in the 14th is there a recommendation of the "Holy Fathers" to Christians, that they pray to them morning and afternoon (page 484). The three others are completely De La Salle-inspired.

The quality and manner of the presence of the Fathers of the Church.

The teaching must be brought to bear in the daily life of the Christian; if it is not, the existential force of the Good News is reduced, in De La Salle's point of view, to something that is impersonal within a cold system. So De La Salle attempts to bring prayer into the daily life of the Christian so that his very life becomes a prayer. For this he uses the thinking of the Holy Fathers.

The majority of times that the Holy Fathers lend their thinking to the Duties of a Christian Part I this is done so that it is easy to distinguish their thought from that of the author, as seen by the use of certain expressions: "*as so-and-so says*", "*according to so-and-so*", "*he writes*"...At the beginning of the section dealing with the Our Father De La Salle openly admits to the citing of those who will follow: "Since it is our intention to present to the faithful all that they can and should ask of God, we are only expressing, according to Tertullian and St. Augustine, just how much there is on the seven petitions of Sunday Prayer" (page 444).

Here is the commentary on the first petition: "The first item that Our Lord commands us to ask for in this Prayer that He himself has taught us, is the sanctification of the Name of God. This does not mean, writes Tertullian, that the Name of God is not in itself holy and sanctified, but that it is He who sanctifies others; what we ask for in this prayer, says St. Augustine, is that the Name of God might be sanctified in such a way and held holy, that all men might be persuaded that there could not exist a holier name and that this conviction would move them so that they do not offend it and encourage them to seek in their actions only the glory of God" (pages 444-445).

Still, the tendency today is that the thought of the theologian from Rheims is complete and authentic but in a passing

sort of way. To substantiate this, I would point out some phrases: "The Christian has to pray frequently and should do this several times daily. The teaching of St. John Chrysostom is explicit on this point; he does not want us to neglect praying to God before sitting down at the table and we should consider it as a great ingratitude to take the liberty of eating what is served to us without having honored Him from whom we have received it and who has given us so many benefits" (page 437). "This Saint requires more from Christians who will not let a single hour pass during the day without offering to God some action, so that, he says, our prayers become an everyday occurrence" (page 437). Here De La Salle is tracing his own portrait. Cf. The Rules Which I Have Imposed Upon Myself.

"St. Augustine, while exhorting us to pray without ceasing, says that while it is true that we cannot be always on our knees or have our hands raised in prayer we can, nevertheless, pray uninterruptedly without much effort since it is enough to not spend even one day without devoting fixed times for prayer" (pages 437-438).

Who was responsible for writing these paragraphs? Was it the Father who inspired them or the author who transcribed them?...While one example may have been sufficient, we offered two. Those who might be interested in additional ones can discover them on their own.

CONCLUSION

De La Salle's devotion and recourse to the Fathers of the Church can be seen in his love and veneration for them: this is another proof of his adherence to doctrine. If Vatican II had invited us to return to the origins of our Founders, it was De La Salle himself who was fond of having recourse to the origins of the Church and the first Christians. He considered the Fathers of the Church as witnesses who were close to its very origin, sure interpreters of its word and solid pillars of the faith and doctrine of Christians. These were the Holy Fathers: a light on top of a bushel, leaven for bread...and in genuine Tradition for the Church, as affirmed by Vatican II: "The teachings of the Holy Fathers give witness to the living presence of this Tradition, whose richness is communicated in the practices and life of the believing and praying Church" (D.V. 8).

It is natural here to cite the paternal last words that the Founder left us: "...Above all I recommend that you be submissive to the Church especially in these calamitous times and that you remain closely united to the Pope and the Church of Rome" (Oeuvres Complètes, page 63). •