

The Tradition of Prayer in the Lasallian School

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As early as 1705, when first setting down in writing how the Brothers should live and teach school, John Baptist de La Salle formulated the elements of the prayer life that was to characterize his Christian Schools. In Chapter VII, dealing with How the Brothers Are to Behave in School as Regards their Pupils, he said ... [the Brothers] shall, however, make it their first and principal duty to teach their pupils the morning and evening prayers, ... and the responses at Holy Mass ... [CL 25: 34]. The revised Rule of 1718 repeated this directive, only indicating the specific prayers the students were to be taught, the Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary, Apostles Creed, and I Confess in Latin as well as in the students mother tongue [Ibid.].

Why the Founder made this the first and principal duty of his disciples is set forth quite clearly elsewhere in his writings. In his Meditations he asserted:

God has given us two sure means to keep from sin and to preserve grace, namely prayer and the sacraments. There is, consequently, nothing that we should more strongly impress on children ... than love of prayer ... You must get them to pray to God often and to pray with attention. ... These are the things you should keep in mind in the instruction you give your students ... [56.3]

In his Retreat Meditations, when indicating how a Christian teacher can show zeal in his work, he said:

... It is important that you teach them [the students] to pray to God ... and to pray with much piety, ... with much recollection, getting rid of all thoughts that could distract their minds during the time of prayer so that they will be occupied solely with God ... [10.2]

And doing these things while the children are still young is very advantageous to them, he insists in his meditation on Saint Monica. For ... What a blessing it is to be brought up in piety from one's youth. This makes it easier to preserve this spirit throughout one's life ... [122.1]

To help his disciples teach their students to pray and to do so properly, in the various catechisms on a number of levels which the Founder composed for different groups of peoples he set forth a rather complete treatise on prayer. Among other things he explained the nature of prayer, the need for this activity, and the advantages it can procure for us [DA: 970 - 976; DB: 1090 - 1093; GA: 1267 - 1268; PA: 1285]. This was followed by an explanation of the interior dispositions that should characterize our prayers and how by our conduct we can

show our respect for God during prayer [DA: 976 - 983; DB: 1093 - 1095; GA: 1268 - 1269]. Lastly, he indicated to whom we should pray — God, Jesus, Mary, and the Saints — along with for whom we should pray and what we should ask for in our prayers [DA: 983 - 992; DB: 1095 - 1097, 1108]. At the same time, he indicated that the prayer of a Christian could take many forms and that different prayers might be appropriate in a variety of places besides the parish church and the classroom as well as on different feasts or on special occasions [DA: 992 - 1000; DB: 1097 - 1102; DC: 1118 - 1122]. The Founder also gave special attention to certain prayers more frequently used by Christians. To help the students pray well when reciting the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Angelus, and the rosary, La Salle explained each at some length in several different places [DB: 1102 - 1113; GA: 1269 - 1272; PA: 1285 - 1286]. Still, while describing the many forms of prayer suited to various places and occasions, La Salle placed great emphasis on Liturgical prayer or the official prayer of the Church [DA: 994 - 996; DB: 1098; DC: 1118 - 1119]. After stressing why a Christian should strive to attend Mass on a daily basis if at all possible, he explained at some length how the faithful could pray the Mass. For this purpose he also provided two sets of prayers the laity could use to join with the priest in offering this sacrifice to God [I: 1293- 1328]. Also, unlike many of his contemporaries the Founder stressed the importance of receiving Communion as often as possible while assisting at Mass [Battersby: 100 - 104]. So after explaining how to communicate well and with profit he provided sets of prayers for preparing for Communion and for thanksgiving after Communion [I: 1376 - 1392]. And to help those students who felt the need to go to Confession before communicating, he provided an instruction on how to make a good confession along with suitable prayers that could be used in connection with this sacrament [I: 1328 - 1370]. At the same time other of the Founder's actions were consistent with this outlook on prayer. If he strongly emphasized the importance of prayer in the lives of the students, he also provided them with suitable helps to pray and to do so properly. But he did not stop here.

When telling his disciples how to show zeal in their work he insisted: Your zeal for the children you instruct would not go very far and would not have much result or success if it limited itself to words. To make it effective it is necessary that your example support your instruction, ... [MTR: 10.3]. And he kept this in mind when describing the prayer life he desired in the Christian schools. All prayers were led by a student officer, the Reciter of Prayers. Each class had two such students, one leading the prayers in the morning, the other, those said in the afternoon. They were to be chosen from among the most advanced students in the class. Required to know perfectly all the prayers used in the school, the leader was to speak in a clear and loud voice all the other students could hear while doing so in a sedate, attentive, and decorous manner [CE: 95, 170 - 171]. On their part, the other students were required to show respect and to behave properly during the prayers, and when necessary the teacher would use signs to indicate what they should be doing and to call to order those whose conduct was deficient in any way. At the same time, though, the teacher was to go

to great lengths to avoid correcting any pupil during the prayers so as not to distract the students in any way during this time. And all the while, by his actions the teacher would set the standard for the students conduct during prayers, in this way showing his zeal as well as his concern that they be recited in a proper way [CE: 95 - 96, 125].

During each school day numerous prayers as well as daily Mass were prescribed at set times in the schedule. Both the morning and afternoon sessions began and ended with a set of prayers. In addition, breakfast which was eaten immediately after the opening prayers as well as the afternoon snack began with a blessing and ended with an act of thanksgiving. Also, at the start of each new lesson, the students paused to say a prayer in which they asked God's blessing on what they were about to do [CE: 34, 51, 92, 93, 133]. Other prayers also broke up the day's activities. At each hour, after the clock struck, a short prayer was said to recall the presence of God. In this way it was hoped to help the pupils to acquire the habit of frequently recalling that they were in God's presence. Likewise, taking turns one student from each class would absent himself to join in the continuous recitation of the rosary in a place set apart for this purpose [CE: 92]. To help all the students to learn the prayers recited in school, during the two repasts they took together they would recite the prayers said in school, and once they knew these well, they would recite the Latin responses for holy Mass [CE: 53 - 56]. So that the students could have in their hands the prayers they recited daily, La Salle composed an Exercises of Piety for use in his schools [CE: 92]. In it were found the prayers said at the beginning and end of the morning and afternoon sessions, the prayers said in connection with the daily catechism lesson, and prayers for special occasions — such as the death of a Brother or of a student attending the school — as well as others that might be used on special occasions such as feasts of the Church or important civil events [CE: 93 - 95; I: 1395 - 1418]. Also, the students had access to two extensive collections of prayerful hymns — set to melodies well-known by them — to be used in connection with the catechism lessons and on other occasions [CA and CB: 1428 - 1575]. Suitable prayers to be recited during Mass were also provided for those students who were more advanced readers along with the responses to be recited during Mass by those proficient in reading Latin [E: 1418 - 1421]. Those less skillful in reading were not neglected, though. They were provided with rosaries to use during this time while being strongly encouraged to recite this prayer during Mass [CE: 99 - 100]. So besides encouraging the students to pray, La Salle also provided them with means to do so that were suitable to the levels of the various pupils in his schools. While doing all these things La Salle took a long-range view. To show the importance of prayer in his schools, when listing the School Officers, The Reciter of Prayers was mentioned first. Then, going into some details about this position, he said that usually a student would hold this position only for one month. The idea was

to rotate this task, giving as many students as possible an opportunity to discharge this function. By doing this La Salle hoped to encourage a large number of students to learn their prayers well and recite them properly so that they would pray at home as well as while in school. In this way he hoped these young people would develop a habit of praying on a daily basis which would lead them to continue to pray throughout their lives [CE: 170 - 171].

As regards his disciples, the Founder was very emphatic about what they were to do in this matter and how serious were their obligations regarding school prayers. They were to teach their pupils how to behave properly during the prayers said in school and when they attended Mass or other liturgical services. Their objective in doing so was to lead these young people to pray often and properly in both situations. For, he insisted, praying often in a proper manner was necessary if the students were to achieve their eternal salvation. Therefore, if the Brother failed in anything connected with his duty in this matter, the Founder asserted, he was not a good shepherd, but rather a false prophet for the flock God had entrusted to his care. And because he had failed in this matter, the Saint added, this teacher would have to render a serious account to God on the day of judgment [MSF: 60.3, 61.3; MTR: 14.2]. So, in any decision he made or anything he did as regards teaching his students how to pray, the Brother was to ask what he might wish to have done on the day of judgment.

Certainly, then, La Salle placed great importance on the prayer life in his schools. At the same time the Founder used all possible means to establish the practice of praying and doing so properly through out the day, making this activity a prominent part of his educational program. Through all he said and did in this matter, then, he left us a tradition of prayer which we should maintain and emulate so that our institutions will be Lasallian in the fullest and best sense of this term.

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