

**The face of the Father  
in the writings of De La Salle**

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The intention of this article is to draw attention to the approach De La Salle proposes we should adopt towards the Father. His views on the matter are to be found in his writings, and the approach he proposes is closely linked with the “economy of Salvation” as expressed by him in the same writings. It is especially in the Meditations for Sundays and in the Meditations for the Time of Retreat (1) that the Father is presented as the active source of salvation and the origin of his loving action for mankind. (2) However, in the Duties of a Christian (3) one can already find signs of this vision of God, even if salvation in De La Salle is more often linked with the mission of the Son than with that of the Father. In this connection, Br Luke Salm writes as follows: “De La Salle often returns to God’s will to save, his love for his human creatures. This is especially manifest in the mission of his Son, Jesus Christ, who for our salvation has instituted the sacraments...” (4) We shall see that in many texts, one can suppose that De La Salle makes a distinction between the divine will to save mankind and the salvation manifested and enacted in the mission of the Son. In the second volume of the Duties of a Christian, the passage on the qualities of prayer enables us to establish a link between the prayer of petition, the paternity of God and salvation. When we pray to God, “resignation (5) is based on the fact that we know that, because God is our Father, he takes care of us, and knows better than we do what is necessary for our salvation” (p.258). The divine will to save us and to take the appropriate means to do so is the will of a Father who knows his children, but also of one who treats them as adults and respects their freedom. Further on, De La Salle explains that this “resignation” has to do especially with material goods, the need for which is subordinated to that of salvation and the search for the Kingdom of God.

Although the paternity of God is mostly treated by De La Salle as the source of salvation for mankind and the will to accomplish it, we must avoid any systematic identification of paternity with the Father. In seems, in fact, that in certain texts, the paternity of God in our regard can be attributed just as easily to the Son as to

the Father. De La Salle’s commentary on the Our Father is very characteristic in this regard. “Who is it that we call the Father at the beginning of the “Our Father”?” “It is God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Duties of a Christian II, p.277). And so, we should not confuse paternity constituting a person within the mystery of the Holy Trinity, with the paternity of God in our regard. Understood in the latter sense, paternity can be attributed first to the Father, but also to the Son and the Spirit. De La Salle follows in this the tradition of the Fathers of the Church who had a similar view (6). De La Salle continues: “Why do we call God our Father at the beginning of the “Our Father”?” “It is for three reasons: 1° Because he created us in his image and likeness. 2° Because he preserves us and gives us all that is necessary. 3° Because by giving us grace, he makes us his children”. De La Salle refers here to acts (creation, preservation, communication of grace) which are attributable to God as God, and not solely to the first person of the Trinity. The name “Father” presupposes that we address ourselves to the whole Trinity with the “same confidence with which children speak to their Father” (p.278).

Let us return to the Meditations. In the Meditation for the third Sunday in Advent (MD 3) which we have already quoted, eternal salvation is attributed to Jesus Christ as Son of God, and the “Father of Lights” is the one from whom come “all excellent graces and all perfect gifts” (cf. Also MF 95) (7). In these meditations, therefore, the Father appears as the sender and despatcher par excellence: he dispenses his graces and his gifts, he destines us for a particular kind of life (MD 6), he sends his angel (MD 27), he gives his Spirit “filled with love and kindness for us” (MD 42), he gives “the true heavenly bread” (MD 48). According to the liturgical season, the eternal Father is presented as performing some particular act in favour of mankind: he gives each one what he needs in order to take the road leading to the Kingdom (Advent); he sends his angel to give strength in a time of trial (Holy Week); he sends his Spirit to renew the face of the earth (Pentecost); he gives his Son as food to make it possible to participate in divine life (Octave of Corpus Christi), etc. The initiatives of the Father in view of salvation appear even more strikingly in the Meditations for the Time of Retreat, even if the word “Father” is used less frequently. As we have already mentioned, God, who is mentioned in the first line, is presented as the Father: “God is so good that he not only brings us into existence by his act of creation, but he desires that all of us come to the knowledge of truth. This truth is God himself and all that he has willed to reveal to us through Jesus Christ, through his apostles and through his Church” (MR 193,1). He chooses his brothers “to announce the Gospel of his Son” to children (MR 193), and these are “the ministers of God” and “even of Jesus Christ and of the Church” (MR 201); he entrusts children to them just as he entrusts to the guardian angels the care of enlightening men (MR 198). In his Meditations for the

Time of Retreat, the initiatives of the Father seem directed at the individual, theological or moral life of the Christian. He is a Father who intervenes in a group of men at a given moment of history. He chooses them and sends them as he sent his guardian angels, his son, the apostles. He is not indifferent to their smallest actions, which are always directed and indissolubly linked to the salvation of children and the glory of God. As for the children, God “cares for them as being their Protector, their support and their Father” (MD 37,3).

The Father is not only the one who sends, acts, takes care of men, he is also the one who welcomes or reproves. In the Meditation for the Sunday in the Octave of Corpus Christi, De La Salle writes: “You are personally invited by God this day to his feast, in which you are to receive his Son, Jesus Christ, in the Holy Eucharist” (Md 50,1). The welcoming attitude of the Father to the soul presupposes a number of conditions: “The eternal Father will recognise it as his well-beloved only in so far as it has a love of suffering, and that it gives proof of this love” (MF 152,3). There is always this theme of conformity to Christ, and in particular to the suffering Christ. It is particularly evident in this meditation for the feast of the Transfiguration, and is presented as a necessary stage on the road which leads to the Father. This “love of suffering” is mentioned by De La Salle after the spiritual experience of the soul which “will be taken up only with God” (second point), and the appeal of the Father: “This is my well-beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; to him, then, listen”. We can affirm, therefore, that in this meditation, it is God, and in particular the Father, who takes the initiative of transfiguring us interiorly, just as he bore witness to his Son exteriorly on the mountain, and of preparing us to follow Christ. This cannot happen without acceptance of God’s action and cooperation with it. Nowadays we would express this concept differently.

For De La Salle, faithful to the Gospel, there are two elements in our relationship with the Father regarding salvation: the Father who welcomes and man who turns towards him. The Father is not satisfied simply with giving, sending, transmitting: he also receives. He “is” fundamentally both a giver and a receiver at the same time. The Father is first of all welcoming, in the sense that he is the source of salvation: “God is pleased to dispense his graces with a very special goodness and mercy” (MF 188,3), which is the same as what we read a few lines later: “receives with open arms the prodigal son”. This presupposes obviously some sort of conversion on the part of man. In this meditation for the dedication of churches, De La Salle goes so far as to speak of the consecration to God of all that we are. •

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(1) St John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations for all the Sundays of the year*, translated by Br W.J. Battersby, 1953.

St John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, translated by Br Augustine Loes, 1975.

(2) In De La Salle as in Bérulle’s “The Greatness of Jesus”, it is the Father he takes the initiative in salvation, just as he is also the ultimate reference of all adoration (cf. Krumenacker Y, 1998, *L’École française de spiritualité*, Cerf, Paris, pp.176-188.

(3) St John Baptist de La Salle, *The Duties of a Christian towards God and the means of fulfilling them well*.

(4) Salm L, 1993, *Salvation*, Lasallian Themes II.

(5) In the 17th century, resignation meant abandoning oneself into the hands of God.

(6) It is evident that in the chapters on prayer in the first volume of the *Duties of a Christian*, De La Salle bases himself to a very great extent on the writings of the Fathers of the Church: first on St John Chrysostom (in particular on the first chapters), then on St Augustine (the basic source for the commentary on the Our Father), and finally on Tertullian, St Cyprian, St Jerome, St John Damascene..

(7) St John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations for the principal feasts of the year*, translated by Br W.J. Battersby, 1953.