

**References to Tertullian
in the Treatise on Prayer
by St John Baptist de La Salle
(Duties of a Christian, I, 405-494)**

I. One Patristic source among others

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In the “Duties of a Christian” (I) (1), St John Baptist de La Salle devotes 90 pages out of 494 to the treatise on prayer, which is a lot. The work concentrates mostly on the sacraments and prayer, both by the quality of what is said and by the space devoted to them (302 pages). Treatises connected with them occupy all of part II of the work, following a section on the truths to be believed and the commandments of God.

The treatise on prayer begins with an explanation of the nature of prayer, and then speaks of the attendant circumstances, the purpose, the persons for whom to pray, and finally the practice of prayer. The plan followed is a fairly classic one in doctrinal treatises. One begins with the individual who is presumed to live a life of faith, hope and charity, and then one looks at the various activities which derive from them. And so, De La Salle describes first of all the nature of the activity of the person who prays (Ch. I, 405-422), and then considers this activity in the light of the physical, circumstantial and moral dispositions it requires (Of the circumstances which must accompany prayer, Ch. II, 423-441). He then goes on to state the purpose (Ch. III, 442-457), the persons for whom to pray (Ch. IV, 457-467), and finally its practice, that is, “the different ways of praying” (Ch. V, 468-494). A more theological treatise would specify the different virtues informed by theological life. But De La Salle is not writing for theologians, and is not trying to say exactly what the virtue of religion is. He wishes rather to write a practical thesis on prayer based, however, on solid foundations. These foundations are, on the one hand, faith, based on the word of God and made effective by sacramental life and conformity to the Gospel, and, on the other, on the whole tradition of the Fathers of the Church and their explanation of revealed truth. As a consequence, certain Fathers are quoted more than others, and the difference in the number of quotations taken varies according to the chapter in which they are included. In the first chapter, on the nature of prayer, its necessity and benefits, St John Baptist de La Salle takes his material essentially from St John Chrysostom’s “Treatise on Prayer”, from which he quotes 13 times, while St Augustine is quoted only once. In the following chapter, St John Chrysostom is still the writer most quoted (7 times), but there are quotations also from St Augustine (5), Tertullian (4), St Ambrose (3), and a number of Fathers quoted much less frequently by De La Salle: Basil, Cyprian, Ephrem, John Damascene, Jerome. It seems logical for De La Salle to turn to a Greek Father when he wishes to speak of the mystical aspects of prayer, and he follows almost word for word the “Treatise on Prayer” of St John Chrysostom. And then, when he wishes to speak of the practice of prayer, of the stages in praying, he turns to the Latin Fathers, normally considered to be “moralists”: Augustine, Tertullian, Ambrose. When he speaks of what “we should ask in prayer” (Ch. III, section I, 442-451), he follows more or less exclusively St Augustine’s commentary on the “Our Father”, quoting it explicitly 14 times in 10 pages. He refers also to Tertullian’s “Treatise on Prayer” (6 quotations). In the next part of chapter III, “Of those for whom we can and ought to pray”

(451-457), De La Salle uses a whole variety of sources. St Augustine is quoted, of course, on 8 distinct occasions, but there are quotations also from St Ambrose, St John Chrysostom, St Jerome and Tertullian. From these observations we can conclude, first of all, that De La Salle chose and used treatises which were much studied in his days, and that he made them a part of a pre-established plan. It is not by chance that St Chrysostom's treatise is used to provide material for the first chapter, and that the prayer of petition is based very closely on St Augustine's work. St Chrysostom came back into great favour in the 17th century, and successive editions of his works appeared, published by the Mauristes. These editions were either complete and in Latin, or abridged and summarised in French. He was considered as a master of the spiritual life, and the balance maintained in his writings between interior life and moral and social life must have been of interest for the 17th century.

As for Tertullian, the fact that he is quoted in chapter II and in the first part of chapter III cannot be seen as fortuitous. In his treatise "De Oratione" (2), Tertullian begins with a commentary on the "Our Father" (Ch. 1-8), and then goes on to speak of the interior attitudes (Ch. 10-13), and the exterior attitudes (beginning in Ch. 14) which must accompany prayer. In the first section of chapter III of his work, De La Salle uses in particular material in chapters 1, 3, 4, and to a lesser degree, the other chapters up to chapter 10 of Tertullian's treatise. In the second section of chapter II, "In which places, at what times and with what posture one should pray to God", De La Salle borrows 3 passages from chapters 14 to 23 of Tertullian's work. De La Salle's plan uses this material in reverse order, but the material from Tertullian fits in with the aims behind De La Salle's plan. Two other quotations at the end of chapter II, on page 440, do not come from the treatise "De Oratione". Regarding the posture of the body during prayer, De La Salle drew his ideas from two other sources, the "Apologetica" and the "Treatise against Marcion". Later on in De La Salle's text (chapters IV and V), quotations from the Fathers are much rarer and more specific: they highlight once again St John Chrysostom (especially regarding the prayer of the heart, at the beginning of Ch. V, which confirms the interest of De La Salle and of his times in these texts), but he refers also to Cassian, St Cyprian, and Theodoret de Cyr.

(1) We have used the anastatic reproduction of the original edition of 1703 in Cahier lasallien N°20 : St Jean Baptiste de La Salle, 1703, Les Devoirs d'un chrétien I, CL.20, Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes, Rome.

(2) We have used the section "Prayer" in the English work "Tertullian, Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetic Works" translated by R. Arbesmann, E.J. Daly, E.A. Quain, Fathers of the Church Inc, New York, 1959, pages 157-188.