

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

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In the second section of chapter II (pp. 435-441), De La Salle explains first of all how prayer should fill the time at our disposal, and sanctify our various actions. When he speaks of the sanctification of the day and of the night, De La Salle refers mostly to St Chrysostom, who belonged to the monastic tradition of the Eastern Fathers of the Church, and who had already (he lived at the beginning of the 5th century) the practice of uninterrupted prayer, which was developed and formalised in the course of centuries by the Byzantine East. When it comes to the posture of the body, he takes as his authority St Augustine and Tertullian, which is logical in the sense that he wishes to stress the external characteristics of the virtue of religion. “According to Tertullian, it is a great lack of reverence for the majesty of God to pray to him seated” (p.439). Tertullian wrote: “If it is disrespectful to sit down in the presence and in the sight of someone you hold in very high esteem, how much more disrespectful is it - in fact, it is the height of disrespect - to act this way in the presence of the living God and of the angel of prayer standing at his side” (ch.16). De La Salle takes only the precept but not the reasoning contained in this passage. And then treating immediately afterwards the custom of praying to God standing on Sundays in honour of the resurrection (p.439), De La Salle goes back to Chapter 16 of Tertullian. As for the custom of praying with hands joined, De La Salle tries to “reconcile” this custom with that of the early Church which prayed with arms extended, without the link between the two postures being clear at all: “It is also quite a common custom to pray with joined hands, and it was an ancient practice of the Church, according to Tertullian, to raise them up to heaven” (1) (p.440). The use of two passages from Tertullian which are not included in a spiritual treatise but in a defence of the faith and of Christian life (Apologia and Treatise against Marcion) leaves two possibilities: either De La Salle knew certain authors such as Tertullian and Augustine perfectly, although this is hardly likely given the extent of their writings, or he had recourse to a collection of texts which gave references from Latin moralists by topics. This last solution is more probable, but it does not exclude the hypothesis that he used in a systematic way the treatises on prayer we have mentioned.

In Chapter III, section I, in his explanation of what we must ask God in prayer, De La Salle makes constant reference to the first chapters of Tertullian’s text. He writes: “Tertullian says that Jesus Christ came into this world to renew all things in it, and to change what is carnal into spiritual. He wished to teach his disciples not to ask for earthly things any more, but only things which lead to heaven, and that is why in the meditation for Sunday he taught them a new way of praying”. This is not exactly what Tertullian says: “All things have been changed from carnal to spiritual by the new grace of God which, with the arrival of the Gospel, has completely driven out the old. And it is this grace that has revealed the existence of the Spirit of God, the Word of God, and the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ Our Lord - the Spirit from whom he derived his power, the word through which he taught, and the incarnate word in which he came. Consequently, like Gaul, the prayer formulated by Christ has three parts: the Spirit from whom he has so much power, the word through which it was expressed, and the incarnate word which makes him bring about reconciliation”. The beginning of Tertullian’s reasoning is much more theological than what is reported by De La Salle and, what is more, all Chapter 1 of “De Oratione” is based on the Gospel of John. De La Salle’s text is at the same time a summary and an interpretation of practical consequences regarding the object of Christian prayer. When De La Salle wrote later about the “Our Father”, that “the Fathers of the first

centuries were accustomed to explaining it often to the faithful”, it is probable that he was thinking about the treatises he used himself, in particular, the commentaries on Tertullian and Augustine. Moreover, in this first section of Chapter IV, the references to these two authors are often linked. This is the case on pages 444 and 445, when explaining the words “hallowed be thy name”. De La Salle quotes Tertullian and Augustine at the same time: “It is not, says Tertullian, that the name of God is not holy and hallowed in itself, since it is he who sanctifies others”. The quotation is exact, but in Chapter III of “De Oratione”, it follows a Johannine approach, in which the name of the Father is revealed by Christ. There then follow the explanations that De La Salle takes from St Augustine, “that the name of God should be so hallowed and recognised as holy by men, that they may be convinced that there can be nothing more holy, and that this conviction may make them afraid of offending him, and lead them to have only the glory of God as their aim in all their actions (p.445). This type of explanation is already mostly present in Tertullian: “It is just that God should be blessed everywhere and at all times, since it is the duty of all men to be always aware of his gifts...And so, even here on earth, we become familiar with this heavenly invocation of God, and with what will be our duty in our future glory. That is the value of the glory we give to God”. It would seem in this example, De La Salle moved from Tertullian to Augustine because he found the moral or religious requests he made more precise. Commenting on the third question, De La Salle (p.445) writes: “Tertullian tells us that, by the the third request, we ask God to give us the means in this world to be saved, because this is the fulfilment and purpose of God’s will with regard to men, and that in this way we pray to God to help us to obey his commandments, with as much fidelity and exactitude as the angels who execute his orders”. In reality, Tertullian’s text in Chapter IV of “De Oratione” is much less dry, because once again he bases himself on the Gospel and the example of Christ’s life. The beginning of De La Salle’s quotation corresponds more or less with Tertullian’s text, but not the end. He wrote: “In this way we ask him to grant us the reality and the riches of what he desires for us, for our salvation, in heaven and on earth, since the totality of his will consists in the salvation of those he has adopted as his children”.

De La Salle, therefore, has had recourse to a treatise in which Tertullian draws his conclusions for his catechumens to help them understand the “Our Father”., and he gives a series of precepts and counsels about the manner of praying (2). It constitutes, therefore, an example of the use of a patristic source which is coherent with its catechetical purpose. He impoverishes his text somewhat by using only the practical conclusions, and by separating it from the commentary on the Gospel and the life of Christ given by Tertullian. Finally, Tertullian is one of the Fathers who stresses most a certain inflexibility on God’s part, the need for a penitential life, and the constant preoccupation with personal salvation (3).

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(1) In “Apologeticus”, Ch. XXX, and in “Adversus Marcionem”, III, Ch.XVIII, Tertullian refers to Christians who pray “expandis manibus” (hands extended).

(2) See Fr Monceaux, 1901, *Histoire littéraire de l’Afrique chrétienne*, vol. I, Brussels, 1963, p.372.

(3) See Fr de Labriolle, 1947, *Histoire de la littérature latine chrétienne*, Paris, Belles Lettres.