

THE MEDITATIONS FOR THE TIME OF RETREAT AND THE DIRECTED RETREAT (1)

This is the first of two articles on the suitability of the *Meditations for the time of Retreat* for use in a directed retreat. To facilitate treatment of the subject I will divide the material into three sections: the place of retreats in the early history of the Institute; a brief discussion on the nature of spiritual direction and the directed retreat; the use of the *Meditations for the time of Retreat* in the directed retreat. In this first article I will discuss the first two elements listed above and in the next issue of LASALLIANA the third and concluding aspect of the subject.

RETREATS: LASALLIAN TRADITION

The retreat has always held a revered place in the spirituality of Saint John Baptist De La Salle and consequently should hold a special place in the spirituality of the Brothers. Many of the great decisions affecting our foundation and ongoing development have been made in the context of a retreat. As early as 1681 De La Salle began to make an annual retreat with the teachers, using his own home as the place. From these retreats came the formation that resulted in the teachers becoming the first Brothers. The retreat of Ascension Thursday to Trinity Sunday 1686, culminated in the pronouncement of the vow of obedience for the first time. Retreats were important enough for De La Salle to purchase the property of Vaugirard for this purpose. Removed from the urban center the Brothers could devote themselves to needed rest, relaxation and prayerful reflection. The first of the ten day retreats to be held at Vaugirard took place from October 8-18, 1691. The importance of the retreat of May 30 - June 6, 1694 cannot be overemphasized, from it came the first draft of the common rule and the first perpetual vows pronounced in the Institute by De La Salle and the twelve principal Brothers. The content of these early retreats and their result seem to indicate that the Brothers came together to seek the presence of God and to discern how best they could respond to what God was asking of them.

The personal experience of De La Salle was also marked by the importance of retreat. We know that he was very faithful to the annual retreat as well as seeking other times for extended prayer. De La Salle made a retreat of thirty days with the Carmelites in 1706. During his personal crisis about 1713 he also made a retreat of forty days at the monastery of Saint Baume and spent extended days of prayer on the Mountain at Parmenie.

Noteworthy also is the importance De La Salle gives to retreats in his writings, especially the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*. Besides this spiritual classic, the *Collection* also contains an extended section detailing material to be prayed over during the annual retreat. In the *Rule* of 1705 part of chapter thirty-six (articles 11 - 21) is devoted to the annual retreat. De La Salle encourages the Brothers to pray with the Scripture and on the duties of the school. He indicates that the morning spiritual reading on each successive day of the retreat is to come from the *Gospel of Matthew* chapters five, six and seven followed by the *Gospel of John*, chapters thirteen to seventeen. He seems to suggest that the morning mental prayer should be made on these chapters and says very definitely, that all mental prayer after noon is to be made on the duties of the school. De La Salle sees the retreat as a time of extended prayer in which the Brothers are invited to consider the quality of their apostolic life in the two-fold context of Scripture and the duties of educational service.

In both the writings of De La Salle and the practices of the early Institute the Brothers are invited to come together to discover how God is present among them and how they are responding to what God is asking of them. Both the writings and the practices reflect the three constant elements in any authentic expression of a Christian spirituality: a desire for God centered in Christ; a willingness to live a life of ongoing conversion; and a life-style marked by simplicity and prayer based on the maxims of the Gospel.

All of this is well summarized in a letter of De La Salle to Brother Barthelemy written toward the end of the Founder's life: "It seems to me that what I desire in prayer is that God make known to me what he wants of me and that he put me in the dispositions he would like me to have".

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN THE CONTEXT OF A DIRECTED RETREAT

Spiritual direction is concerned with directly helping a person with his/her relationship with God. The person is helped not so much to understand the relationship better, but to engage in it, to enter into dialogue with God. Spiritual direction focuses on what happens when a person listens and responds to a self-communicating God. Perhaps an illustration from Scripture will be helpful. In the first chapter of the *Gospel of John* is the marvelous story where the disciples of John meet Jesus for the first time (John 1:35-39). John is talking with several of his disciples when Jesus appears on the scene. John immediately recognizes Jesus and points him out to his disciples with the words, "Look! There is the Lamb of God!" In this instance John functions as a spiritual director by helping his disciples to recognize Jesus in their midst. As Jesus leaves the scene, two of John's disciples leave John and follow Jesus. Down the road a bit, Jesus turns to these two disciples and ask, "What are you looking for?" Notice the question is one of desire, one of life. The two disciples respond with a question, "Teacher, where do you live?" Also a question full of life. Then Jesus invites them into relationship with him, "Come and see". So they went and spent time with him talking about, no doubt, their life experiences. This is what spiritual direction is about. One person helping another person to recognize how God is present in his/her life and to follow him. We can define spiritual direction then as help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him/her and to respond to this personally communicating God. To help another grow in intimacy with God and to live out the consequences of this relationship. The focus in spiritual direction is on experience, and specifically, on religious experience, i.e., any experience of that other person we call God. Moreover this experience is viewed not as an isolated incident but as an expression of an ongoing personal relationship God has established with each one of us. Relationships develop when the persons involved pay attention to one another. We make an assumption based on Christian tradition that God is always faithful to his part in the relationship; that God is always paying attention to the other person.

It is important to make a few clarifications here. Spiritual direction is an act of accompanying another person; a walking with another person. It is not telling another person what to do, or imposing in any way on the freedom of the other person. The primary relationship is always between God and the other person; the spiritual director is a privileged companion. The role of the Spiritual director is to help the other person focus always on the Lord. Spiritual direction is not counseling; it is not psychotherapy; it is not pastoral counseling. While each of these have their place in our experience they are not to be confused with spiritual direction. Spiritual direction is about that relationship that is mine with the Lord and that manifests itself primarily in the activity we refer to as prayer. Spiritual direction is a process that helps a person clarify what is happening in his/her prayer life. In this process a spiritual director does two things: the director helps the person to pay attention to God as God reveals himself in the person's life and the director helps the person recognize his reactions and decide on his responses to God.

A directed retreat is a retreat in which one enters into a spiritual direction relationship with another person for the duration of the retreat. Instead of conferences and spiritual exercises, the person spends his/her day in silent prayer an solitude with the Lord. Once a day the person meets with the director to share the experience of the prayer and to allow the director to help him/her clarify how the Lord is present and what He may be asking of the person. From what the person shares the director may make suggestions about looking at certain patterns that seem to be developing in the person's life, or he/she may make no suggestions at all. The director takes the experience of the person as the person gives it.

The normal movement in a directed retreat is the foundational experience of a God who both loves us and forgives us. We first experience a God who is constantly offering himself in relationship regardless of the sinful condition of the person. From this initial experience one moves to contemplate this God incarnate in the world in the presence of Jesus and to open oneself to the invitation of the risen Lord to come follow him. This experience is repeated many times over the course of a person's life. In a directed retreat this experience may be experienced very intensely because of the atmosphere of constant prayer. However, there is no pattern to be expected in the experiences of a directed retreat since the Lord leads each one differently. The only expectation one may have in a directed retreat is that the Lord will reveal himself.

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