

A Method of Prayer for Teachers

William Mann, FSC²

Introduction

In the *Collection*³ and also in *The Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*,⁴ Saint John Baptist de La Salle⁵ proposes a method for personal and interior prayer. The method, however, should not be mistaken for the prayer itself. Neither should one mistake personal and interior prayer for the whole of one's relationship with God. De La Salle's method was proposed as a way of entering into conversation with God, the kind of conversation which is capable of illuminating and transforming the whole of one's life. It was for this end that De La Salle developed three series of *Meditations*⁶ to help his teacher disciples enter more easily into the daily practice of this conversation.

For De La Salle, there is ultimately no distinction to be made between the quest for closer intimacy with God in prayer, on the one hand, and the duties of one's employment as a Christian educator, on the other. The two are clearly and indissolubly linked in the ministry of Christian education. "Since you are entrusted with the instruction of others, you should endeavor to become competent in the art of speaking to God, about God, and for God; but rest assured that you will never be able to speak to your students in such a way as to win them to God, until you yourself have learned to speak to God and about God."⁷

The kind of personal and interior prayer recommended by De La Salle really requires that one be immersed in the Scriptures. "This process involves the kind of dynamic that happens in making friends with anyone. You have to spend time together, talk together, listen to each other, and get to know each other."⁸ And the Scriptures present us with a privileged opportunity to spend this kind of time with God.

Over and over again in the *Meditations for Sundays* and *Meditations for Feasts*, De La Salle begins with explicit references to Gospel texts. The *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* reflect a profound assimilation of the mystery of God's love at work in the world as it can be discovered in the writings of Saint Paul. "It is God that we strive to know by spiritual reading and by interior prayer so that we might be better able to make him known and to make him loved by all those to whom we have made him known."⁹

As De La Salle became aware, by God's grace, of the human and spiritual needs of the artisans and the poor, he devoted himself to forming educators totally dedicated to teaching and to Christian education. God's Spirit breathes life into the world. The Holy Spirit, in every generation, continues to confide to teachers a special role in the Christian and human formation of the young and, through them, continues to enable students to welcome Jesus into the deepest aspirations of the human heart as Good News.

Personal and interior prayer is not the privatized activity of an isolated Christian. Prayer is “a time when we can still ourselves enough to begin to feel our natural connectedness to each other and the world.”¹⁰ The acquisition of the habit of personal and interior prayer will be out of the question for anyone who does not try to cultivate compassion for others.¹¹ In prayer, the Spirit unites the one who prays with the whole of the Church gathered around Jesus in need and prayer. It is, therefore, really prayer with the Church; furthermore, it is, for De La Salle, prayer normally made in a Church.¹²

The method of prayer being proposed is intended for those Christian educators interested in making a journey of personal reflection and prayerful contemplation with the Christian Scriptures according to the tradition of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. Such an undertaking presumes a certain willingness to concern oneself with what is happening in the world and not distance oneself from the social context in which one is situated. The method proposed requires about thirty minutes a day.

It also requires that you put aside your busy-ness and external clutter for a little while, and that you try to free yourself from some of your inward noise and internal static. It requires some solitude, some silence. For, after all, personal and interior prayer is “a way of entering into silence so deeply that we can hear the whole world’s speech, a way of entering into solitude so deeply that we can feel the whole world’s connections. In prayer we touch that transcendent Spirit from whom all things arise and to whom all things return, who makes all things kindred as they go.”¹³

First Movement: In the Presence of the Living God

You are invited to begin by entering into a more conscious awareness of the presence of God. We walk in God’s world. The Trinity is immanently present. Our God is neither distant nor indifferent. Rather, God, present in the world, desires that all of us come to “the knowledge of God himself and of all that he has willed to reveal to us through Jesus Christ, through his apostles, and through his Church.”¹⁴ However, there are many other realities in each of our lives that compete for our attention and distract us from awareness of this presence.

Where is God most present to you? Is it in the quiet of your heart? Is it in your relationships? Is it in ministry? Perhaps God is particularly present to you in the beauty of nature or under the rags of the poor who wander in the streets. For some, it is the presence of God in the Eucharist, which attracts. Take the time to recall God’s presence, and then spend some minutes in its conscious awareness. Spend as much quiet time, as possible, in this way.

Who am I to be in God’s presence? Who is this in whose presence I find myself? “Implore him: Lord, do not pass me by, do not leave until I am aware that you have come. Lord, keep knocking at my door; knock again and again until I open to you. This is the attitude of an open person. One’s whole being is a ‘yes’ to God in silence.”¹⁵

God wills a union of our mind and heart with that of Jesus who came to do the Father’s will. “I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”¹⁶ The wonderful news is that God invites “me to share, as his son [or daughter], in his own care for my brothers [and sisters].”¹⁷

Ask God present to you to help you to be more aware of this will, to be more open to it, to be one in mind and heart with what God wants most to do in the world through you. “Doing your will, O God, is delightful!”¹⁸

And so, in the first movement of the method of personal and interior prayer proposed here, you are invited to spend some time considering the divine will. Remember “God’s will is certainly found in anything that is required of us in order that we may be united with one another in love.”¹⁹ Ask God to help you to understand where God is leading you through and in the midst of the concrete experiences of your everyday ministry.

Second Movement: Living the Mystery of Christ

The second movement of our method of personal and interior prayer is the invitation to contemplate the mystery of God’s love at work in the world, and particularly in your own life. This will normally be the main body of your time in prayer, and the Jesus of the Gospels will be at the heart of this movement.

De La Salle suggests that we contemplate Jesus Christ in the Gospels²⁰ so that, by the example of his life and teachings, we might be gradually transformed to be more like him.

How are you participating in the mystery of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in your daily efforts to reach and touch the lives of the people with whom you minister? This is, above all, really a matter of identity and re-birth in Christ. “And the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me. Of course, I still live my human life, but it is a life of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”²¹

Jesus gives “us an example of how human beings can live transcendently by a love of self-emptying sacrifice on behalf of others. He lives for others. His focus is to bring fullness especially to the poor, the sick, the outcasts of society, the oppressed and the discriminated against, the criminals and the sinners. This is the way we should love. This is how we see the glory of God shining through us. God looks like Jesus! We will be like God if we live like Jesus.”²²

Do not rush this stage. Spend time with the suggested²³ passage of Scripture. Read it over a few times. Pay special attention to the words or phrases that catch your attention. Listen to what is being said and to the one who is saying it. Be quiet. Go slowly. Look at your life. See how your life compares with the life of Jesus. Allow God to speak to your heart. Enter into the mystery of God’s merciful goodness. Contemplate this God of love at work in your own life. Be attentive to all that stirs within you.

Third Movement: Empowered by the Spirit

Finally, we arrive at the third movement, or the conclusion, of the prayer period. This will normally take just a few minutes. Quickly remember what has happened during the prayer period. What feelings animated you? What were your principal reflections?

As you come to the end of your prayer time, you are asked to make a resolution to be more open to the work of the Spirit who is in you and trying to work through you for others. Embrace the graced texture of your own life story. Reflect on where God's Spirit seems to be breaking into your life and drawing you to sacrifice yourself that others might have a fuller life. What is it that is helping you to live each day with authenticity and holiness? "Follow the Spirit's lead."²⁴ Accept the new life that God is trying to give you today.

Take the time to express the love and admiration you have for God. Thank the Father, Jesus, and the Spirit for the graces received during the prayer period, as well as for the sentiments and feelings that have been experienced. Offer yourself again to God with Christ, with all the activities and efforts that the day will bring.²⁵

Conclusion

It is hoped that this method will assist you to converse with God about your ministry as a Christian educator. Look around our world with the eyes of faith. Listen in hope to the cries of all of those who wait. Respond in love and zeal, humbled by this opportunity, which is ours to share in the renewal and re-creation of the face of the earth "as the ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ."²⁶

Endnotes

1. A slight adaptation of "Introduction" in *Ambassadors of Jesus Christ: Prayer Meditations for Christian Educators* by Brothers William Mann, Henry Dissanayke, and Isaias Txegay (Rome, 1995; reprinted in Manila, 1996), pages 5-9.

2. Brother William Mann, who holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from Colgate Rochester Divinity School (1990), serves as the president of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota since 2008 and as the president of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU) since 2015. He is a former vicar general of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (2000-2007).

3. John Baptist de La Salle, *Collection of Various Short Treatises* (Lasallian Publications, 1993).

4. John Baptist de La Salle, *The Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer* (Lasallian Publications, 1995). Cf. Brothers Miguel Campos and Michel Sauvage, *Encountering God in the Depths of the Mind and Heart: A Commentary on John Baptist de La Salle's "Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer,"* translated by Brother Oswald Murdoch and edited by Brothers William Mann, Gerard Rummery, Emmanuel Sciberras, and Julian Watson (Rome, 1995).

5. Cf. Brother Luke Salm, *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (Romeville, IL: Christian Brothers Publications, 1989); Brother Edwin Bannon, *De La Salle: A Founder as Pilgrim* (London: De La Salle Provincialate, 1988); and Brother Alfred Calcutt, *De La Salle: A City Saint and the Liberation of the Poor through Education* (Oxford: De La Salle Publications, 1993).

6. John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (Lasallian Publications, 1994).

7. De La Salle, *Meditations*, #64.2.

8. Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (Harper Collins Publishers, 1983, 1993), page 101.

9. De La Salle, *Meditations*, #41.3.

10. Palmer, page 80.

11. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New Directions Books, 1972), page 77.

12. Cf. Brother Jean-Louis Schneider, *Ministre de l'Éducation Chrétienne* (Rome, 1994).

13. Palmer, page 124.

14. De La Salle, *Meditations*, #193.1; cf. *1 Timothy 2:4*.

15. From Ladislaus Boros, *On Christian Prayer*, as quoted in Brother Álvaro Rodríguez, *Método de Oración, para conversar con Dios, según San Juan Bautista de La Salle* (Guatemala, 1982), page 11.

16. *John 10:10*

17. Merton, page 18.

18. *Psalms 40:8*.

19. Merton, page 76.

20. The suggestion here is to follow the Catholic practice of using the passages from Scripture proposed as part of the day's Liturgy of the Word. Readings from Scripture are part of every Mass. At least two readings are proposed (one of which is from the Gospels). Choose one of these readings as the focus of the "second movement" of interior prayer. These readings can be found at <www.usccb.org/bible/readings>.

21. *Galatians 2:20*.

22. George A. Maloney, *Entering into the Heart of Jesus: Meditations on the Indwelling Trinity in Saint John's Gospel* (Alba House, 1988), page 19.

23. Again, the suggestion is to choose one of the readings from daily Mass as the focus of the “second movement” of interior prayer. Cf. <www.usccb.org/bible/readings>.

24. *Galatians* 5:25.

25. Brother Álvaro Rodríguez.

26. De La Salle, *Meditations*, #195.2; cf. *2 Corinthians* 5:20.

27. Cf. “Formula of Vows” in *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), article #25. See, also, *Meditation* #86.3 (The Nativity of Jesus Christ): “Nothing draws souls to God more strongly than the poor and humble condition of those who wish to lead them to him But if you do not resemble the newborn Jesus by these two outstanding qualities, you will be little known and little employed, nor will you be loved or appreciated by the poor. You will never have for them the role of savior that is proper for you in your work, because you will draw them to God only insofar as you resemble them and Jesus at his birth.”