

## Let Us Remember That We Are in the Holy Presence of God

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When you first come to a Lasallian school, you frequently hear the words *Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God*. This is a practice from the very first schools begun by De La Salle, where every half-hour, a student tinkled a small bell and then said these words. There followed a period of silence for all to reflect. ***This silence was, and still remains, of the greatest importance.*** Nowadays, the silence is ended in some countries by all saying with the leader, "I will continue, O my God, to do all my actions for love of you."

The extraordinary challenge presented to teachers in the first Lasallian schools was to change from teaching individual pupils the same lesson one after another to developing, at the same time, various activities for different groups in a class of well over sixty pupils. De La Salle's biographers all point out that at first the untrained teachers tried to control the whole group by frequent and severe corporal punishment. Adrien Nyel and John Baptist de La Salle trained them. However, they developed a different kind of discipline marked by clear rules and a *largely silent* classroom. This prayer, this frequent reminder of the "presence of God," in one way "broke" the silence but then intensified it in a new way.

Its significance in the first schools was particularly relevant because of the immediacy and reality of death from many different causes: war, famine, and disease. In Seventeenth-Century France, life expectancy for men was about 35, whereas for women it was barely 30. The funeral bell, therefore, tolled frequently, especially in winter; and it was customary for teachers to invite the class to pray for the dead person as the bell tolled.

It is important to note that the "presence of God" in this prayer is referring not so much to the place but to the people present in this place, the teacher and the young people. It is a particular way of reminding all Lasallian *teachers* of their *ministry* of being ***older brother or sister to the young people*** because of the presence of God in each one, of the importance of relationship with each one. For the *young people*, it can be a reminder of a loving God who is not remote from the difficulties of their lives, who ideally, see something of God's goodness reflected in the words and actions of their teacher.

De La Salle's understanding of God's presence in people gathered in Christ's name was something he had first learned in his priestly training at the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice. But he came to learn it in a new way through his own experience. This is well illustrated in the incident of 1683 in which he tried to address the first teachers' anxiety about their economic future. De La Salle, the priest and theologian, attempted to reassure them about the future by reminding them of the words of Scripture in the Sermon on the Mount, of God's concern for all creation, right down to the smallest sparrow. He probably saw himself as God's presence to these people of a lower class uttering God's words to them. But the confrontational words of the teachers reminding him of his own comfortable position became for De La Salle, God speaking through

their very complaints. De La Salle came to see God's presence in them, in their very "rejection" of the facile Scripture answer he had so easily quoted at them! He came to see that he could not speak about poverty to others unless he became poor himself.

The Brothers' *Rule* gave the presence of God a high priority:

They [the Brothers] will give the greatest attention they can to the holy presence of God and will take care to renew it from time to time, being convinced that they should think only of him and of what he orders, that is to say whatever concerns their duty and their employment.

In other words, the Brother was most a Brother *not* at the time when he was in the presence of God in the chapel but when he was, as the Brothers' *Rule* said, *from morning to night* with his pupils in the classroom!

What De La Salle had learned in theory in his priestly training as a spiritual leader, became grounded in a new way through his experience with the poor, so that he came to see that this recalling of God's presence was the cement that would bond teacher and student again and again in their common relationship with God. It was a reminder to the teachers of their duty as teachers; it was a reminder to pupils of their dignity as people made in the image and likeness of God.

The presence of God is so important for De La Salle that it appears in many different ways in his writings. For example in his first printed book, *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, a chapter of which was read aloud each morning during the breakfast session that followed the opening prayer in class:

Teachers should urge [the children] to show others those signs of consideration, honor, and respect appropriate to members of Jesus Christ and living temples of God, enlivened by the Holy Spirit.

In his writings on *interior prayer*, De La Salle returns first to the presence of God:

[Our Lord] is in the midst of his Brothers in order to give them his Holy Spirit to direct them by him in all their actions and in all of their conduct.

When you wish to apply yourself to interior prayer . . . you begin by applying yourself to the presence of God.

In many of his *Meditations* De La Salle returns to this theme, as in this excerpt from his meditation on the coming of the three kings to Bethlehem:

Recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children whom you have to instruct. Adore Jesus in them.

Each time I recall this citation, I am reminded how the well-born De La Salle never loses his awareness of the distance between the rich and the poor.

*Why is the Presence of God heritage important for us today?*

Recalling the presence of God through offering times of silence to young people in today's noisy world can be a very special gift. The importance of such moments can be greatly strengthened when it is obvious that teachers are modeling what they too believe and are willing to share with their students. Teachers who are prepared to vacate the "security" of their teaching subject in their willingness to share their beliefs and to show their common humanity are creating a very special relationship with their students.

Meister Eckhart, the mediaeval mystic, writes "Nothing in all creation is so like God as *stillness* . . . I will sit and be *silent and listen* to God's grace within me."

T. S. Eliot, the modern poet, reminds us that "If we really want to pray, we must first learn to listen, for it is in the *silence* of the heart that God speaks."

The word *presence* in itself has a wide range of meanings depending on its reference point. For example, the *presence* of the Queen; the *presence* of the police; and the line from Wordsworth in *The Prelude* reminds of the link between *presence and feeling*:

. . . and I have felt a *presence* that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts.

So, the invocation of the presence of God is not a statement but *an invitation*. Let *us* remember that *we* (all of us) are in the *holy* presence of God, because we are attentive to God's life in all of us present in this place at this moment. The words – of *God* – remind all present of what kind of conduct is appropriate for those recalling that they are *in the presence* of God. There is a very special sense in which the Lasallian classroom that recalls the presence of God is transformed symbolically during this silence into a chapel.

In his writings, De La Salle reminded his Brothers of God's presence everywhere: in the community gathered in God's name, in the sustaining of each person's existence, in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in each person, in a particular way in the church or chapel, in what is called the *real presence* of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. But the most frequent recollection that punctuated the Brother's day in class was this shared presence of God with his pupils. This is our heritage. It is not too strong to say that all Lasallian educators make God present to those confided to their care. At the same time, those present remind the educators that they are indeed in the presence of God. This practice has been retained for over three hundred years and adapted to the circumstances of the different religious traditions in all the countries where the Brothers have worked, as the following story shows.

In 1989, two De La Salle Christian Brothers from the General Council [of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools] in Rome – who had been visiting Egypt and just concluded their work by visiting the Brothers' community at Saint Marc College in Alexandria – were going through the passport control at the airport when one of them ran into some difficulties

because it seemed he had overstayed his visa. The ensuing dialogue (in French) held up the exit line for some five minutes, so that when the Brothers were allowed through and were making their way to the departure lounge, an officer dressed in an air force captain's uniform caught up with them and asked (in French) the cause of the holdup. In the conversation that followed when the Brothers identified themselves as De La Salle Christian Brothers, the captain said, "I was a pupil in your school at Saint Marc's Alexandria for ten years! I would like to offer you some coffee." The two Brothers, knowing that this was still Ramadan, the fasting month, accepted the offer and noted that only two cups were ordered. Then the former pupil spoke with great affection of his years at the school and of his fond memories of the men who taught him. As their plane was called and the Brothers began to thank the captain for the coffee, he said to them, "Brothers, today I'm in charge of a plane and when I'm at the end of the runway and have received the signal to take off, the last thing I will say to myself, as I always do, is *Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of Allah* [the Arabic word for God]! You taught me that!"<sup>2</sup>

Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God!

### **Endnotes**

1. Gerard Rummery, FSC, holds a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Lancaster University. He served two periods on the staff of the International Lasallian Center (CIL) in Rome and was twice elected to the General Council of the De La Salle Christian Brothers (1986-1993 and 1993-2000). He remains a presenter and researcher with Lasallian Education Services in Australia.
2. A personal experience.