
The Holy Presence of God in De La Salle's Spirituality

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Saint John Baptist de La Salle had an abiding interest in fostering the remembrance of the holy presence of God, both for himself, the Brothers, and the students in the schools. It is an ongoing and recurring theme in many of his writings and a deep current of his personal spiritual life. His fond desire was to deepen the spiritual lives of his followers and of the students who attended his schools, so that they might come to realize God's intimate involvement in their lives, the one who "guides all things with wisdom and serenity . . . in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time."³ This engaged "holy presence of God" was a major component of De La Salle's spiritual DNA. Both during De La Salle's time and today, the remembrance or recollection of that presence is central to Lasallian prayer and ministry, because awareness of this presence in the heart and mind fuels our work, empowers our ministry, and guides our personal and community discernment. It sustains our growth in the love of God and one another, and it integrates the chapters of our life narrative. Therefore, to look at some specific examples of the wide and deep reach of that phrase in our foundational documents would surely be beneficial.

In the 1718 *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*,⁴ De La Salle identifies the presence of God as one of the four "interior supports" of the Institute, holding it among those qualities that are "essential."⁵ In the *Collection of Short Treatises*,⁶ it is part of a list of "Ten Commandments" of the Institute – originally rendered in French verse for ease of recollection: "God ever present you'll adore, and oft his grace and aid implore."⁷ In that same *Collection*, which was an abbreviated compilation of various sayings, devotions, and practices, along with some of his other writings, the importance of remembering "the presence of God" appears in many different contexts.

- *List of Topics for Self-Examination*: "Are you attentive to the holy presence of God?"⁸
- *The Spirit of This Institute*: "They will pay as much attention as they can to the holy presence of God and take care to renew this from time to time . . ."⁹
- *Explanation of the Spirit of Our Institute*: "What is meant by keeping our attention fixed on God? It is to think of the presence of God."¹⁰
- *Means to Become Interior*: "We must practice recollection . . . because it disposes and assists us to apply ourselves to the presence of God and interior prayer, and gives us facility in doing so."¹¹
- *The Divine Office*: "When you recite the Divine Office . . . apply yourself as much as you can to the meaning of the words, to the mysteries alluded to therein, or simply to the presence of God . . ."¹²
- *Holy Mass*: "Frequently recall the thought of the holy presence of God and the respect that the angels have before the divine Majesty."¹³
- *Spiritual Reading*: "Do not begin reading without placing yourself in the presence of God and asking him by a short prayer for the grace and the light to understand and to practice what you will read."¹⁴

- *Recreation*: “Do not go to recreation too eagerly or with too much effusiveness. Be careful not to become dissipated, and do not lose sight of the presence of God.”¹⁵

Attending to the presence of God was also a pervasive invitation for students in the schools. The classic educational work, *The Conduct of Schools*,¹⁶ integrates the recollection of God’s presence within the school’s daily life, both as to how one enters the classroom, as part of the curriculum, and as occasional reminders during the course of the day.

- “They will be inspired to enter the classroom with profound respect, out of consideration for the presence of God. When they have reached the center of the room, they will make a low bow before the crucifix and will bow to the teacher if one is present.”¹⁷
- “Those who are studying the chart of syllables will learn and repeat the acts of the presence of God . . .”¹⁸
- “At each hour of the day, some short prayers will be said. These will help the teachers to recollect themselves and recall the presence of God; it will serve to accustom the students to think of God from time to time and to offer God all their actions, and to draw upon themselves God’s blessing.”¹⁹

The hourly class prayer, along with all the other prayers stipulated in *Exercises of Piety for the Christian School*,²⁰ begins with the sign of the cross and is immediately followed by “Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.” This distinctly Lasallian invitation is as ubiquitous among these prayers as the sign of the cross is regulated, repeated, and unfailingly included.²¹

Even in his book on politeness, *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*,²² written for young inner-city boys who had little notion of how to behave in polite society, the motivation for proper behavior is directly related to God’s presence. De La Salle writes,

- “It is surprising that most Christians look upon decorum and politeness as merely human and worldly qualities and do not think of raising their minds to any higher views by considering them as virtues that have reference to God, to their neighbor, and to themselves.”²³
- “When they [parents and teachers] wish to train children in practices pertaining to bodily care and simple modesty, they should carefully lead them to be motivated by the presence of God . . . children should do these things out of respect for God in whose presence they are.”²⁴

The Method of Interior Prayer

It is in his *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*²⁵ (*Explanation*) these elements of De La Salle’s method are put together in a way that shows both the outlines of his spirituality and exemplifies the difficulty of expounding it with complete clarity. His perceptible framework for genuine interior prayer – the ongoing existential, interior relationship with God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) that constituted his deepest and dearest pursuit and desire – defies easy unpacking. Some have found his method for interior prayer – with its austere style, 3 dynamic movements, 21

acts and sentiments more at home in the Seventeenth Century than the Twenty-First Century – too detailed and laborious. Others have found the primary direction and inner dynamism of his guidance, along with the wonderful reflection, gems that are dropped along the way, personally appealing, revelatory, and full of insight. When considering this work, it is important to remember that what counts for De La Salle are not the acts but rather the developed disposition of allowing oneself to be filled with God through an interior unity brought about by the action of the Holy Spirit.²⁶

The *Explanation* is a book for beginners in the practice of interior prayer, put together after De La Salle's death and based on his talks, conferences, notes and other resources, especially and including those Brothers who had known him well. When he "retired" at Saint Yon in Rouen toward the end of his life, De La Salle spent much of his time guiding the young Brothers in the practice of interior prayer, inspiring, instructing, correcting and training them in what he believed to be a most essential dimension of their vocation. It was something that he was uniquely able to promote at that time. In terms of its spirit and essential contents, the *Explanation* was "the last book" that he wrote. It reflects the fruit of his personal experience of interior prayer, his scripture-based spirituality, his theological training, his years of reflection and practical decisions in founding the Institute, and all of the pieces of his life that had led him to this point. The book was published in 1739, 20 years after his death.

When reading the *Explanation*, the complex yet essentially simple nature of interior prayer emerges as if one were zooming out on Google Earth from a single house to the view of earth from space: the details are part of something much, much larger and universal. The elements of this prayer form – explanations, reflections, steps to follow, cautions against scrupulosity, invitations and examples for personalizing one's acts of faith – are all pieces of something that is greater than the sum of the parts. Notions about prayer, faith, and God's presence revolve around one another like the color tiles on a Rubik's cube. Yet at the same time, the substance of the book comes across as a work of art, or rather as an artist describing a work of art, whereby what is verbally woven together slowly emerges into particles of personal perception, brought about by means of cumulatively added layers and nuances, growing conceptual relationships, and syncretic associative connections.

What is very evident is that interior prayer becomes most clearly defined through the settled context that only consistent practice achieves. This requires time. The dancer Martha Graham once said that it took 10 years of hard work in order to become a creative dancer. "It took years to become spontaneous and simple. Nijinsky took thousands of leaps before the memorable one."²⁷ Similarly, each intentional pursuit of genuine interior prayer does not arrive fully formed simply through intentionality. It must be willed and practiced over time. The dance of prayer is based on "hard work." It takes shape and grows with the deliberate, patient speed of life itself.

Brother Donald Mouton, in his excellent introduction to the *Explanation*, writes that

in the mind of De La Salle, prayer that is truly interior escapes all methods. The ultimate consequence of the method is to dispense with the method. This is De La Salle's final recommendation. In prayer, we must allow ourselves to be interiorly and gently drawn by God, even if it is to some sentiment we had not proposed to ourselves beforehand.²⁸

The goal of De La Salle's method is the formation of a deep interiority in one's soul so as to allow the Holy Spirit, the living Spirit of Christ, to pray in us. It is eminently worthwhile to examine some of the method's infrastructure in order to enhance our understanding of, and progress toward, this deep interiority.

There are three movements or stages that constitute the dynamics of De La Salle's interior prayer method.²⁹

1. *Recollection into the Presence of God*: distancing ourselves from external preoccupations and moving towards the "depths of our heart," where we encounter the living God at the heart of our lives, and enter into the climate of interior prayer.
2. *A Mystery, Virtue, or Teaching*: engaging in interior prayer's principal activity, filling one's soul with God in and through Jesus Christ, and contemplating his person, with a mystery, virtue, or teaching that may be engaged and brought into one's own life.
3. *Resolutions*: returning to our daily responsibilities renewed, revitalized, and filled with resolutions that are practical and efficacious, thereby participating in the spirit of Jesus Christ, entering into and effectively incarnating his sentiments and dispositions.

In one of his letters, De La Salle writes, "To my mind, what I must ask of God in prayer is that he tell me what he wants me to do and inspires me with the disposition he wants me to have."³⁰ While most of us are very aware of his trust in Providence, reading the events of his life as calls from God, for De La Salle, the "dispositions" of Jesus Christ are the other key element, because these are the agent of transformation, in line with the Bérullian spirituality of the time.³¹ This trust in God's guidance through circumstances and events, closely combined with the cultivation of the sentiments and dispositions of Jesus, is still a captivating way of engaging one's faith today. De La Salle's interior prayer method provides steps for fostering such engagement, with the goal of entering into these sentiments and dispositions of Jesus Christ, being fully aware of God's presence, becoming suffused with the Holy Spirit, and simply living attentively with God, immediate, close, personal; uniquely "present" in a way no-thing has been before.³²

After describing a period of recollection – of settling ourselves into a broader, deeper, interior perspective of faith – three main means of becoming aware of God's presence are highlighted: in the place where we are, in ourselves, and in a church. As the introduction explains, "These various ways do not create that presence, but rather enable us to recognize a presence that precedes us, a presence that is already there."³³ It calls to mind Jesus after the resurrection. "He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him" (*Mk* 16:7). God is always ahead, already there long before we get there.

For each of the three means that De La Salle writes about, two specific ways are provided, explained with texts that weave in direct phrases from Scripture, along with examples of prayer exhortations that guide a person along the way. These six specific contexts are like the answer that Golde, Tevye's wife in *Fiddler on the Roof*, gives when he asks her, "Do you love me?" and Golde details the many things she has done for and with him over their 25 years of marriage, ending with the phrase, "If that's not love, what is?" In this case, De La Salle details how and where God's

love, God's presence, may be brought to light, based on the scriptures and his own long experience. He might likewise say, "If that's not God's presence, what is?"

- God is *present in the place where we are*. This can be considered in two ways.
 - God is everywhere (*Ps 139:7-10*).
 - Our Lord is present in the midst of those who are gathered in his name (*Mt 18:20*).
- God is *present within us*. This can be considered in two ways.
 - God maintains our existence (*Acts 17:28*).
 - God is present through his grace and the Holy Spirit (*Lk 17:21*).
- God is *present in a church*. This can be considered in two ways.
 - A church is the house of God (*Mt 21:12-13*).
 - Our Lord is in the Most Blessed Sacrament [the Eucharist] (*Rev 21:3*).

For De La Salle, the practicing and awareness of God's presence is both the means and the goal of interior prayer, and simple attention is both the introduction and the final arrival into that presence.³⁴

- "The first thing to be done in interior prayer is to become permeated with the presence of God through a sentiment of faith."³⁵
- "We can gradually acquire a certain facility for making ourselves aware of the presence of God by simple attention."³⁶
- "Applying ourselves to the presence of God by simple attention consists in being before God with a simple, interior view of faith that God is present and remaining thus for some time . . ."³⁷
- "This simple attention procures inner consolation for the soul, which makes it find delight and joy in its awareness of the divine presence. The soul maintains this consolation without any need of other thoughts or reflections."³⁸
- "[W]ays of engaging in interior prayer on a mystery, as also in considering the holy presence of God, can be related to the three stages of the spiritual life: discourses and multiple reasoning befit beginners; few and prolonged reflections befit the proficient; simple attention befits the advanced."³⁹

This prayer of simple attention "seems to be the normal kind of prayer he expected his brothers to be drawn to."⁴⁰ It is a presence and disposition before God "with faith that God is present and remaining in a disposition of interior silence and affectionate attention."⁴¹ This goal is achieved neither automatically nor quickly, two aspects that militate against its easy adoption in today's world, where speed and ease hold the upper motivational hand. Many years ago, one of my graduate school teachers was Sister Margaret Gorman, RSCJ, who taught the psychology of youth religious development. One of her most interesting comments was made at the end of a class, when we were looking at a wide variety of developmental frameworks with its various "stages." She said: "Just because you know about the stages doesn't mean that you've gone through them." De La Salle would agree.

It may be fair to say that the steps or stages in De La Salle's interior prayer method are not completely rigorous. They are not like steps on a ladder, where one invariably follows the last.

They are more like occasional signposts on the road to the presence of God, similar to the yellow arrows found printed, carved, tiled, spray-painted, scribbled and scattered along the various Camino pilgrimage routes in Spain, all of them pointing to and leading to Santiago de Compostela and its Shrine of Saint James. Interior prayer is more like a pilgrimage, something where both the journey and the goal are inextricably woven together. This deep connection between the universal presence of God and the pursuit of the presence of God is well made in the introduction to the *Explanation*:

The place De La Salle gives to the presence of God in his *Explanation* constitutes a distinctive characteristic of his method of interior prayer. In fact, the whole purpose of the method of interior prayer in De La Salle's view is to help us live every moment of life in the presence of God.⁴²

The frequent intentional recollection of the presence of God is one part of that training ground for developing the capacity of living in the presence of God.

Ultimately, practicing interior prayer and cultivating an ever-deeper awareness of the presence of God are two dimensions of the life of faith, that which constituted the core of De La Salle's spiritual life. De La Salle wanted his followers to be completely filled with the spirit of faith. His meditations, exhortations, letters and writings for Brothers and others, along with the witness of his life's journey, proclaim and support that single aim. In the *Rule* of the Brothers that De La Salle wrote in 1718, one section has been retained in all subsequent iterations of that *Rule*, because it describes this core element of the "story" of Lasallian education:

That which is of the utmost importance, and to which the greatest attention should be given in an Institute is that all who compose it possess the spirit peculiar to it . . . The spirit of this Institute is first, a spirit of faith, which should induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God, and to attribute all to God . . .⁴³

There is, in effect, no difference between the spirit of faith and the spirit of interior prayer. They are identical faith stances before God, seen from two perspectives.

What simple attention is in the context of interior prayer, the spirit of faith is in the context of our daily lives. For De La Salle, the spirit of faith is simple attention "in action."⁴⁴

The Experience of the Holy Presence of God

For Saint John Baptist de La Salle, interior prayer is a habitual and intentional cultivation of exercising simple attention to God's presence. It "consists in being before God with a simple, interior view of faith that He is present."⁴⁵ Such an interior view of faith, cultivated through intentional reflective engagements with the virtues, teachings, and mysteries of Jesus,

leads the mind and heart to a sentiment of silent adoration, of love, of admiration, of gratitude and thanksgiving, of self-abasement and a desire of the heart to unite ourselves with our Lord . . .⁴⁶

It is very unlikely that De La Salle would have described interior prayer in this way without having experienced it himself, or that he would have recommended it to his Brothers unless he deeply believed that it was a form of prayer that they would very likely be drawn to, even or especially when their daily labors were so demanding.⁴⁷ As such, this may be a prayer and practice that would be welcome, even important, for all Christian educators who wish to deepen their prayer life in and through their vocation.

Given the extent to which attention to the Holy Presence of God permeated the life of De La Salle and his followers, it is perhaps not surprising that a similarly directed element was folded into the prayer life of the school, most noticeably through the hourly invitations to recall the presence of God that punctuated the daily school schedule. In the words of Brother Gerard Rummery, De La Salle

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.⁴⁸

Indeed, this shared presence of God with one's students is a hidden treasure of our Lasallian 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.⁴⁹

It is this living heritage of attending to God's presence in both prayer and ministry that has led Brothers, Lasallian educators, alums, and others to appreciate and recognize God's presence in their own lives and circumstances. They give testimony and life to the ongoing story of the Lasallian charism today.

Endnotes

1. This is a reworked version of the introduction that appeared in *Let Us Remember: Stories of the Holy Presence of God* (Washington, DC: Christian Brothers Conference, 2018), pages 9-22.

2. Brother George Van Grieken, FSC, is a De La Salle Christian Brother who is currently the Secretary-Coordinator of the Lasallian Research and Resources Service at the Casa Generalizia in Rome and is the Director of the Lasallian Resource Center [www.lasallianresources.org]. A graduate of Saint Mary's College of California (BA and MA) and of Boston College (PhD), he has worked as a classroom teacher and in Lasallian formation, vocation ministry, and school leadership, including two years as President and CEO of St. Joseph's Institution International School in Singapore. His writings and workshops focus on Lasallian spirituality and formation, especially their application and integration in today's society and educational contexts.

3. Jean-Baptiste Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (vol. 1, book 1), translated by Richard Arnandez FSC (Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1983) pages 60-61.

4. John Baptist de La Salle, *Rule and Foundational Documents*, translated and edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1989).

5. Ibid., page 69.

6. John Baptist de La Salle, *Collection of Various Short Treatises*, translated by W.J. Battersby FSC and edited by Daniel Burke FSC (Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1993).

7. Ibid., page 70.

8. Ibid., page 16.

9. Ibid., page 31.

10. Ibid., page 34.

11. Ibid., page 52.

12. Ibid., page 56.

13. Ibid., page 57.

14. Ibid., page 61.

15. Ibid., page 63.

16. John Baptist de La Salle, *Conduct of Christian Schools*, translated by F. de La Fontainerie and Richard Arnandez FSC and edited by William Mann FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1996). This work, based on 40 years of experience and collaboration, was first printed in 1720 and became the basis for many other teaching Orders founded in the subsequent centuries. The work was revised and reprinted through 24 editions until the early 1900s.

17. Ibid., page 49.

18. Ibid., page 55.

19. Ibid., page 92.

20. John Baptist de La Salle, *Religious Instructions and Exercises of Piety for the Christian Schools*, translated by Richard Arnandez FSC and edited by Eugene Lappin FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002).

21. There is at practice in some cultures of using the phrase as an invitatory invocation that is immediately followed by the response, “And let us adore him!” This was a much later development in the Institute.

22. John Baptist de La Salle, *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, translated by Richard Arandez FSC and edited by Gregory Wright FSC (Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1990). This work was a book that students read after having learned how to read well, so that they might profit by the contents as well as their reading practice. A sample chapter heading: “Yawning, Spitting, and Coughing.” The earliest copy dates from 1695, and the earliest printed edition was in 1703. There were 150 editions of the book that were published into the 20th century, and some quotations from the work still show up in modern books on politeness.

23. Ibid., page 3.

24. Ibid., pages 3-4.

25. John Baptist de La Salle, *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, translated by Richard Arandez FSC and Donald Mouton FSC and edited by Donald Mouton FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1995). Much of the substance of this section is taken from, and more fully developed, in the introduction to this work.

26. Ibid., “Introduction,” page 5.

27. Matthew Fox, *Creativity* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2002), page 170.

28. John Baptist de La Salle, *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, “Introduction,” page 12.

29. Since writing the introduction, Brother Donald Mouton has combined the *Recollection* dynamic with awareness of the *Presence of God*. These three essential prayer movements are also well described in the talk given by Brother Miguel Campos FSC to the 2006 International Mission Assembly, entitled “Fidelity to the Movement of the Holy Spirit” (Section 4.1). His contemporary application within the context of Lasallian discernment is wonderfully described and applied. The talk may be found in *AXIS Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 3, no. 2 (2012). [<http://www.saintmarys.info/axis>]

30. John Baptist de La Salle, *The Letters*, translated by Colman Molloy FSC and edited by Colman Molloy FSC and Augustine Loes FSC (Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1988), page 248.

31. The French School of Spirituality, initiated by Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle, stressed the necessity of one’s personal *kenosis* (self-emptying) in order to be filled with Christ. The Christian made explicit acts of faith in the “principal Christian mysteries” (the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption, and so on), incarnating the very being of Jesus by adopting actions and interior attitudes similar to those Christ first brought to reality by His every deed, His every feeling, His every outlook – in terms of their depth and effect, His every “mystery.” By entering into Christ’s

sentiments and dispositions, one entered into Christ's mystical reality of salvation and thereby came to act, and to be, more and more like Him.

32. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that faith "is the belief in the objective reality of the personal . . . The God our ancestors heard was the voice of reality as it responds to and affirms the personal, echoing our consciousness, telling us that we are not alone . . . It is here, in the mystery and majesty of the personal, that God lives." In Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life* (Bloomsbury, 2004), page 2-3. This is the kind of intimate mystery that De La Salle would have experienced, although described in different words and perhaps engaged in different ways.

33. John Baptist de La Salle, *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, "Introduction," page 8.

34. Brother Joseph Schmidt FSC has commented that "Although Saint La Salle may have been influenced by the Carmelite school of spirituality, and in particular by Saint John of the Cross, in naming this way of prayer *simple attention*, there can be no doubt that his description of it was based on his own experience" (*Lasalliana* 05-A-31). The Carmelites were located in Rheims, De La Salle's hometown; and we know that he made retreats with the Discalced Carmelites in 1686 (near Louviers), 1691, and 1706 (Rue Vaugirard, Paris). When De La Salle and two Brothers brought their educational ministry to Paris in 1688, he very likely became aware of, or already knew about, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (1614-1691), a Carmelite Lay Brother who lived at the Carmelite monastery near Rue Vaugirard for over 50 years, and who was said to be held in high esteem by many learned people, religious, and priests because of his wisdom and insights into the practice of the presence of God. It would not be a stretch to believe that De La Salle met and spoke with Brother Lawrence at some point, or at least knew about publications of and about Brother Lawrence that appeared in 1692, 1694, 1699, and 1710, especially given their extensive popularity at the time.

35. John Baptist de La Salle, *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, page 59.

36. *Ibid.*, page 50.

37. *Ibid.*, page 51.

38. *Ibid.*, page 55.

39. *Ibid.*, page 97.

40. *Ibid.*, "Introduction," page 11.

41. *Ibid.*, "Introduction," page 4.

42. *Ibid.*, "Introduction," page 8.

43. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, Italy: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2015), page 11.

44. John Baptist de La Salle, *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, “Introduction,” page 12.

45. Ibid., page 51.

46. Ibid., page 97.

47. Ibid., “Introduction,” page 11. This idea is developed further by Brother Joseph Schmidt FSC in *Lasalliana* 05-A-31.

48. Gerard Rummery FSC, “Let Us Remember That We Are in the Holy Presence of God” in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 8, no. 3 (2017), page 76. [<http://www.saintmarys.info/axis>]

49. Ibid., page 77. Note especially the story that Brother Gerard Rummery FSC shares at the end of the article about the Muslim airline pilot, a former student of the Brothers in Alexandria, Egypt, and what he took away from the experience of regularly recalling the presence of God in school.