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The Identity and Vocation of the Lasallian Formator & Lasallian Discernment Presentation from the September 2021 CIL – Rome, Italy

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Good morning. I am happy to be with you, and I am happy to be speaking to members of my religious family, Brothers who are engaged in formation ministry or who will be engaged in formation ministry. I don't need to tell you how important that ministry is. What I will share with you today has come directly from my experiences, my reflections, and my desire to be helpful to you.

There is a short saying from the early Fathers of the Desert that has been repeated among monks for generations. "Abba Poemen said about Abba Pior that every single day he made a fresh beginning."¹ Think about that, please. Why did this short phrase survive Abba Pior for so long? I suggest that it is because it is so very difficult to make a fresh beginning every single day. What a grace it is to be able to do that! But this is what I wish for all of us, that every single day – including today – we seek to make a fresh beginning.

The topic for today is both a daunting and an important one. Of course, all the topics that you have been covering during this CIL (Centre International Lasallien (International Lasallian Center)) have been important. And no doubt they covered critical dimensions of formation and being a formator. But the topic for today is different because it focuses specifically on you as a spiritual person, someone who is drawn into the spiritual life and someone who is responsible for the spiritual lives of others. This is why it is daunting. What I mean by "daunting" is that the topic is both astounding and frightening.

First, it is astounding that anyone should speak to you about how a person should pursue a genuine intimacy with God, the God who is present in all the hidden corners of your life. On one level, anyone is capable of sharing how God is part of their life, from the beggar to the shop owner to your mother and father. And all such conversations are likely to be rich, intimate, and memorable. On another level, no one is capable of truly knowing how God is part of your life, how you pursue genuine intimacy with God or how you avoid doing so with distractions, excuses, and rationalizations. Therefore, bringing these two levels together in a session such as this is rather astounding, because the topic is astounding.

I claim no special knowledge in knowing how you should pursue genuine intimacy with God. In fact, being here in front of you reminds me of a story from the early Fathers in the Desert.

Abba Moses was asked to come to a meeting of the elders to pass judgment on one of the monks who had committed a sin. When Abba Moses left his hut, he took a worn-out basket with holes, filled it with sand, and carried it along. The people who came to meet him said: “What is this, Father?” Then the old man said: “My sins are running out behind me, yet I do not see them. And today I have come to judge the sins of someone else.”² When they heard this, the elders said nothing to the one who had sinned and pardoned him. So let me say at the outset that I feel like that monk. I am no expert on the spiritual life.

But perhaps what I can do is share with you some seeds that I have picked up along the way; thoughts and insights. Some of these may take root in the fertile soil of your heart, wherever that soil lies in your experience and thinking. If something does strike you as important and takes root, please quietly water and nurture it, because that is the Holy Spirit working within you.

Second, it is frightening that anyone should speak to you about how a person should pursue a genuine intimacy with God, because we are dealing here with things that are truly filled with a silent power to heal or hurt, attract or repel. All of us remember interactions with people when, perhaps unknowingly on their part, they said or did something that had a great impact on our lives. It’s sort of like when you meet a former student and he or she recalls something you did or said that impacted them strongly. But you don’t remember it at all! If that is true of our own interactions with one another, then our interactions with God are all the more transformative, and I would say, dangerous.

For those of you who know the C.S. Lewis children book series called *The Chronicles of Narnia*, recall a description of Aslan, the lion figure for God. After Aslan had suddenly left a group, one of the characters explains: “One day you’ll see him and another you won’t. He doesn’t like being tied down, and of course he has other countries to attend to. It’s quite all right. He’ll often drop in. Only you mustn’t press him. He’s wild, you know. Not like a tame lion.” God is not tame. We do not control God. In fact, we hardly know the least part of God. Pursuing an intimacy with God, once we truly start down that road, is a good thing, but it is not a safe thing. You should be cautiously frightened and very attentive, as if you were entering the presence of an untamed lion. It is a fine image to start out with, because imagining yourself in front of a lion compels a visceral humility, a thoroughly convincing notion that you’re not the one in control here.

Such a sense of fear and attraction at the same time are, in fact, a characteristic of all genuine religious experience. Rudolf Otto wrote early in the last century that all religious experiences are “numinous” experiences. They have the tendency to invoke fear and trembling (*Mysterium Tremendum*) along with an equal sense of fascination and attraction (*Mysterium Fascinans*). We can understand the attraction part, otherwise, none of you would be here. But what about that “fear” part, in the specifically religious sense? How is it possible to be afraid of something religious that we are so attracted to?

One very helpful explanation comes from the Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel, reflecting on the phrase from the Book of Proverbs,³ “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.” He explained that the Hebrew meaning of the word for “fear” might be better translated as “awe.” He writes this:

“Awe is an intuition for the dignity of all things, a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme. Awe is a sense of transcendence, for the mystery beyond all things. It enables us to perceive in the world, [hints] of the divine, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple ... What we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe.”⁴ Please keep that last sentence in mind: “What we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe.” The best things that each of us might expect from ourselves today is perhaps some better comprehension of something having to do with the spiritual life, but more importantly a better awareness of how and where you as a person perceive the “world’s intimations of the divine” or “sense the ultimate in the common and the simple.”

In the description of today’s topic that was provided to us, four specific goals stand out.

- 1) Helping formators to move from cultural religiosity to genuine intimacy with God.
- 2) Build a deeper understanding of the spirituality motivations that support the mission, and competence and confidence in fulfilling responsibility.
- 3) Providing a community journey that aims to discover the presence of God.
- 4) The necessity for prayer, in person and community, for one’s discernment and integration, in order to assume one’s responsibilities regarding the formation of others.

These are all excellent goals, but none of them will be fully reached today. You probably already knew that. Advancement in the spiritual life is, first, not predictable or controlled; second, not something that is ever completed this side of heaven; third, not automatic and done without efforts; and fourth, never subject to personal whims or interests. Everything important in your life shares those same characteristics.

Important relationships in your life are not predictable or controlled because they involve the equally complex lives of others. They are never something that is ever completed or done. They are not automatic but require effort to maintain, and your personal whims or interests are finally of little consequence in the growth of such relationships. In a school setting, genuine education in the classroom is certainly unpredictable and never fully controlled. If there are 30 students in the classroom with you, then there are 465 possible relationships in that room. Neither is genuine education ever finished; it keeps going throughout life. And good education is certainly not automatic but requires discipline and hard work. The teacher’s personal whims and interests are of little importance except insofar as they support the goals of the classroom. Even physical health and sports activities depend on personal circumstances and social opportunities that cannot be predicted or controlled. Good health is an ongoing concern throughout life; it only

stops with death. People do not automatically maintain good health, and usually personal diet whims and interests are not generally in support of good health.

The point is this: If these characteristics are true of other important areas of our lives, why would they not be true of this truly critical area of your life as formators, as spiritual persons, those who are drawn into the spiritual life and who are responsible for the spiritual lives of others? For something that is arguably one of the most important aspects of our lives, it is helpful to remember that the spiritual life is not predictable or controlled; not something that is ever completed this side of heaven; not automatic and done without efforts; and never subject to personal whims or interests.

What, then, can be said about the spiritual life? My short answer would be that it depends on the person who is speaking. Many would find that it is easier to say what the spiritual life is not rather than what it is, just as it is easier to say what love is not rather than what it is.

Like Michelangelo and his sculptures, we can chip away at what needs to be removed to reveal the greatness lying within. This is called the *via negativa*, where we come to know God by paying attention to what God is not. St. John of the Cross is famous for his methodical and poetic way of describing this method.

To come to enjoy what you have not
you must go by a way in which you enjoy not.
To come to the knowledge you have not
you must go by a way in which you know not.
To come to the possession you have not
you must go by a way in which you possess not.
To come to be what you are not
you must go by a way in which you are not.⁵

Others who have had some experience in pursuing intimacy with God tend to talk about their experience in positive terms, and what it means for them today. This is called the *via positiva*, coming to know God by paying attention to what we do know or can say about God, especially through analogies. A good example of this is in the gospel of St. John: “God is love, and whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.”⁶ Each approach has a long tradition, and I think that most of us probably adopt a combination of both approaches.

To summarize, I would say that those who have had significant experience in pursuing intimacy with God have moved to a different kind of place than the others. They tend to listen more than they talk, perhaps sharing short insights or doing small actions that shine with quiet brilliance and share wisdom in a uniquely personal way. With subdued intensity, they live what they know and believe. They are small lions themselves.

Let's now look more directly at how one's spirituality may be enriched and stretch into new territories. You already know that when you take advantage of moments of reflection, your spiritual learning actually happens. And you already know that in the classroom the teacher cannot give anything to students that they do not wish to receive. It is the student who learns, and only the student who learns. The same thing is true with the spiritual life, perhaps especially with the spiritual life. Outside readings, spiritual directors, significant experiences, etc. cannot make any difference until the person decides to engage them, absorb them, process them, and integrate them within his or her own life and decisions.

Here is a prayerful reflection on a short excerpt from the American writer, Annie Dillard.

“I live in tranquility and trembling...there is not a guarantee in the world. Oh, your needs are guaranteed, your needs are absolutely guaranteed by the most stringent of warranties, in the plainest, truest words: knock; seek; ask. But you must read the fine print. ‘Not as the world giveth, give I unto you.’ That’s the catch. If you can catch it, you’ll come back, for you will come back transformed in a way you might not have bargained for. Divinity is not playful. The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet. There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see.”⁷

Notice that the author starts off by saying that she lives in tranquility and trembling, which are very similar to the characteristics that Rudolf Otto described as characteristics of a religious experience. The spiritual life is not confined to prayer and churches and the sacraments, great as these are. The spiritual life is nourished by all deep human experiences to draw us toward God, toward love, toward others, toward creation, and toward the deeper wells of our own soul.

Pope Saint John Paul II wrote, “The incarnation signifies the taking up into unity with God not only human nature, but in the human nature, in a sense, everything that is flesh ... the Incarnation then also has a cosmic significance: the firstborn of Creation unites himself in some way with the entire reality of humanity, within the whole of Creation.”⁸ This means that the arts, the sciences, literature, and even the most common human experiences bear touchpoints to the Incarnation that are accessible to all of us.

In our own life journeys, we have the privilege of participating in the living tradition of St. John Baptist de La Salle and its ongoing expression through history. The Spirit of faith and zeal that characterizes his educational charism is something that has become part of us. Therefore, it is also there that we should first look for spiritual input and guidance. One aspect of the spirituality of St. John Baptist de La Salle that deserves special attention is also something you are already very familiar with. This is exactly why it may no longer have the kind of impact on you that it had on De La Salle himself. What I mean is the recollection of the holy presence of God. And if you just said in your mind, “Oh, I know that already,” then perhaps it is worth saying that there is a lion hidden there, waiting to come out.

But let me begin by sharing another saying from the Fathers of the Desert. These men had gone into the desert to do exactly what we are talking about today, cultivate a genuine intimacy with God. They wanted to be solitary, by themselves, but often others would come out into the desert to find them. They wanted to profit from the fruit of their labors, and these outsiders would approach them with the phrase, “Father, give me a word that will save me.” In other words, tell me something that will help me move to a greater intimacy with God. Eventually, just to get these interlopers to go away, those ascetics in the desert might give them a short phrase or statement. Those same phrases and stories were then handed down for centuries as the sayings of the desert Fathers, and a mark of their effect is that their impact is still felt today.

In this case Abba Poemen said, “Seek God, and not where God lives.”⁹ Now why would that short phrase have been remembered and repeated for some 1600 years? I think it is because this phrase is a wonderful invitation to reflect on where spirituality may be found, where God may be found. It highlights the fact that God is found as God, the One who is within and without. There is no “place” where God happens to live. In other words, there is no place other than the here and now – the really here and now – that God dwells. Any spiritual approach worth its name looks for God’s presence at the here and now, the present place and moment. In a very true sense, there is no “there” when it comes to God or God’s presence. It is always and eternally a “here.” There is no future or past time where you can encounter God or God’s presence. It is always and eternally a “now.”

The 16th century philosopher and theologian Erasmus, wrote “Bidden or unbidden, God is always present.” Carl Jung later made the phrase into a sign that hung over the entrance to his house in Switzerland. Our Founder, St. John Baptist de La Salle, lived this reality of God’s genuine presence on a daily basis. Fostering the remembrance of the holy presence of God, both for himself, the Brothers, and the students in the schools, was 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. God was the one who “guides all things with wisdom and serenity ... in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time.”¹⁰ What a fine way to also describe the role and responsibility of those engaged in formation! Formators guide others with wisdom and serenity, so that one decision leads to the next in an almost imperceptible way and over a long period of time. God’s providence in the lives of those you guide comes alive when you guide them in the same way that God guided De La Salle and continues to guide each of us today.

In the little book, *Collection of Short Treatises*, attention to the presence of God shows up in everything from the list of topics for self-examination (“Are you attentive to the holy presence of God?”) to the explanation of the Spirit of the Institute (“What is meant by keeping our attention fixed on God? It is to think of the presence of God.”), to what to do during recreation (“Be careful not to become dissipated, and do not lose sight of the presence of God”).

It shows up in his letters to the Brothers (“Applying ourselves to the presence of God is a most useful practice; be faithful to it.” “May sure that God’s holy presence is often with you, for it is the principal fruit of interior prayer.”). And it suffuses his Method of Interior Prayer, which describes various steps in developing one’s interior prayer. He also explains that “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.”¹¹ His insight here was no different than that of Abba Poemen: “Seek God, and not where God lives.”

So why might this be important for those involved in the formation of others to know and to do themselves? De La Salle tells us in one of his letters: “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 that he wants me to have.”¹²

Notice that there are two things that result from prayer, from dwelling in the holy presence of God. First, a response to our desire to know where God wants me to go, and second the disposition that he wants us to have. Most of us are very aware of De La Salle’s trust in providence, reading the events of his life as calls from God. Most of us may not be aware of the great importance for him, as for all those in the French School of Spirituality, to ask for the “dispositions” that they should have in responding to God’s will. Such dispositions were ones that shared in the dispositions of Jesus Christ and as such were agents of transformation. As you took on the same dispositions that Jesus had during his earthly life, you also shared in the redemptive grace associated with them, and thus you became more and more like Jesus.

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

“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.”¹³ If there is one central core of spiritual practice within our Institute, it is this practice of dwelling in the holy presence of God.

“Ways 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.”¹⁴

Here we have come back to something that was pointed out earlier but deserves to be more fully developed: simple attention in that last quotation is a goal, and you can’t take a shortcut to that goal by simply doing it. “What’s so difficult about practicing simple attention?” some may say. It’s a fair question.

But I would submit that the kind of simple attention that De La Salle refers to is like the simple entry into a new classroom by a Brother with 30 years of experience as compared to a brand-new

teacher with little or no experience. The action is the same, but the presence is not. It takes time to get to that point, and it takes work. The dancer Martha Graham once said that it had taken 10 years of hard work to become a natural dancer. "It took years to become spontaneous and simple. Nijinsky took thousands of leaps before the memorable one."¹⁵ Similarly, each intentional pursuit of genuine interior prayer does not arrive fully formed only by desiring it. It takes years to be able to achieve spontaneous and simple attention to the holy presence of God, as De La Salle demonstrated.

The Dominican theologian, Herbert McCabe, has an excellent analogy about this. In one of his sermons, he speaks about what it takes to really understand one of the plays of Shakespeare.

Depths of meaning, he says, are not found " ... in a play when you watched it for the first time; you have to learn to understand it, and you cannot take short cuts to the depth. ... [A]s we understand a mystery, it enlarges our capacity for understanding. ... [W]hen it comes to reaching down to the deeper meanings, there is no substitute for watching or taking part in the play itself. The mystery reveals itself in the actual enactment of the play. It is very hard to put the meaning of Macbeth into any other words and that is why literary critics are always harder to read than plays; it all seems so much more complicated. This is not because critics are trying to make things difficult nor is it that the deep meaning is itself something complicated. It is something simple; the difficulty lies in bringing it up from its depth. When you try to bring deep simplicities to the surface you have to be complicated about them. If you are not, then you will simply have substituted slogans ... for the truth."¹⁶ When we speak about the holy presence of God, it is not a slogan. To really appreciate, understand, and live what that phrase means requires bringing it up from the depth to the surface; and that's neither simple nor easy. This phrase is worth remembering: "As we enter into a mystery, we increase our capacity for understanding it." It is through indwelling, through the actual and real doing of things, that the capacity for understanding it is able to happen.

Of course, it is these same depths of meaning that are the substance of the incarnation, Christ's redemption, and those major mysteries that were such a large part of the spirituality of 17th Century France. This is also the spirituality that we live out today. The story of salvation is not just a story or a play. We do not think ourselves to salvation. We have to fully enter into it; mind, body, and soul, with disposition, intentionality, full presence. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ itself attests to the fact that salvation is something that is done, that is lived, and that sometimes it hurts. As we enter into the mystery of salvation ourselves, we increase our capacity for understanding it. This is one reason why De La Salle's meditations were written for the Brothers; so that they could enter into those mysteries as part of their daily religious life and their work in the school. By doing so fully, they would grow in both understanding the gospel and living it out into their lives.

On the more practical level, there are two very different areas that I believe are important ones to think about in the personal and spiritual growth of formators and those with whom they work.

One of these is not just an elephant in the room; it is rather a herd of elephants running around the room. I am referring to the quietly pervasive culture of technology and online media. Some of your countries have not yet been inundated with the push of technology as others have been. But if it isn't there yet, it will soon be.

Now, as many people know, I'm a big fan of technology, although not so much social media. The impact of new technologies and online media on formation for the Lasallian mission and specifically on Brothers' formation and life is so close that we no longer notice it. Information and communication technologies are the *de facto* context for living in general, sweeping along all who seek to communicate, educate, and engage in formation. We are all small boats on a rushing river. This is why those involved in formation should think about the social, learning, and behavioral dynamics that are part of the use of technology and social media. You should learn the river's currents so that you guide your boats well and avoid the rocks.

You need to spend time, both initially and as a regular habit, learning about the world of technology and online media. It cannot be avoided or dismissed, and it is completely agnostic and cares little about God or those who desire intimacy with God. This can make it dangerous or can make it beneficial. This will depend on two things: first, whether or not we pay attention to it and try to understand it over time, and second, whether we engage in those practices that bring out its positive aspects and repress its negative ones. There is not enough time here to provide you with a sufficient overview, but there are plenty of resources that, depending on the depth of your interest, will bring you up to speed on the topic.¹⁷

There is one other major dimension of this topic of formation that needs to be considered. This is your personal spiritual life and the personal spiritual lives of those entrusted to your care. I can only share what I have learned in my experience. It would be very beneficial to you if each of you asked a couple of older Brothers back home what kinds of things they would recommend to you when it comes to the spiritual life of a Brother. Their wisdom is often as simple and direct as those Fathers in the desert.

Recently, Brother David Hawke, the former Visitor of ANZPPNG, answered the question: "What were some of the practices that kept you going all this time?" His answer was this: "It's a blessing that St. John Baptist de La Salle gifted the Institute with the Spirit of Faith and Zeal. Personal daily prayer on the scriptures of the day or reflecting on my experience is absolutely essential. I don't know how one could do ministry as a Visitor without a deep spirit of faith. Also, the Brothers that have joined me in my prayer have been a great support, just by their very presence. But also, I like to take regular walks, listen to music, and just reflect on things while I'm doing that. Now, I find those also things that are important for me. And it's good also for me to have close friends beyond the Brothers." If you put this same question to two or three older Brothers whom you know, I know that the answers will help you in your personal spiritual journey.

Each of our personalities, with its talents, skills, and inner life, has been the result of the decisions and activities from our past. We may not be defined by those decisions and activities, but they have shaped us. And the decisions that we make today and tomorrow, or the activities that we do, will continue to shape us. As an older Brother, I now more fully appreciate that while I am content with my current spiritual life, I can also see now that it would have been better if I had made stronger earlier decisions about how to sustain and deepen my spiritual life. When it comes to the spiritual life, it's never too late, of course. But the tree bends more readily when it is younger.

Allow me, then, to share three formative realities that I've found to be important. The first and most obvious formative reality is the fact that each of us, especially if we are involved in formation, teaches most directly and invisibly through our personal example.

Recall that St. John Baptist de La Salle wrote this: "Example makes a much greater impression on the mind and heart than words. ... [Students] are led more readily to do what they see done for them than to carry out what they hear told to them, particularly when the words they hear are not in harmony with the actions they see" (Med. 202.3). You are the example that those in formation look to for guidance.

And it is up to you to decide whether they will see a witness or a stranger – a witness or a stranger.¹⁸ A witness lives, or tries to live, what they believe and know to be true. They demonstrate the twelve virtues of a good teacher and carry a naturally appealing character. You must have been to the places where you want to lead others. What you say and do, in every encounter or circumstance, makes a difference. Otherwise, you are a stranger, just someone speaking to me or living in the house. Nothing sticks because there is nothing of consequence that is discussed, demonstrated, or lived.

The second and less obvious formative reality is the fact that you actually have to do things in order to advance in the spiritual life. "Faith comes not through pondering but through action. Not words and speculations but experiences teach us what God is. To let in fresh air we have to open a window; to get tanned we must go out into the sunshine. Achieving faith is no different; we never reach a goal by just sitting in comfort and waiting, say the holy Fathers. Let the Prodigal Son be our example. He *arose and came*. (Lk 15:20)." The quotation goes on to say, "Not without reason it is written that Abraham was seventy-five when he set forth, and the laborer who comes in the eleventh hour gets the same wages as the one who comes in the first."¹⁹ Therefore, you can start to continue at any time in life.

A very popular speaker, David Allen, who is the guru of an organization approach called "Getting Things Done" has a very simple rule for people to use if they want to move forward. The rule is to ask the question, "What's next?" If you want to get something done, just ask that question and then act on it. Once acted on, the place where you arrive will be an entirely different context for the next time that you ask the question. If you keep asking the question

“What’s next?,” you are living out the saying: “The longest journey starts with a single step.” And asking, “What’s next?” is as effective in the spiritual life as it is in any other context.

For the third formative reality, based on my experience, I’d like to quote a good friend of mine who worked with the boards of trustees of the schools in our district. She is very good in the formation of adult groups. I asked her once, “Janet, you really do this well. When do you think that adults really learn?” She said, “Brother, in my experience it happens in two situations. First, if they speak to one another about something that both are interested in. And second, when they ask questions.”²⁰ Conversations and questions happen all the time in formation communities, especially when there are individual or group challenges. These may be some of the most important formative events in the community, whether such difficulties or challenges come from the inside or from the outside. In fact, sometimes you as a formator must do or say something that becomes a catalyst for reflection, because you see it as something that should be addressed and dealt with.

I’ll give you a personal example from many years ago. When I came back to my original community from three years of full-time study in Boston, where I was largely living on my own, returning to the community schedule, one that I’d never really thought much about, now felt stifling. I suddenly could no longer do what I wanted when I wanted, as I had in Boston during those study years. It was an unexpected and dramatic shift of daily experience, and I wondered if I should stay in the Brothers. However, I resolved that my vows had to mean something, and so I decided to jump back into community life with full trust and no resistance, and then see what would happen, where God would lead me. Of course, three months later I had rediscovered that what I had thought would be limitations instead opened up rich, unforeseen possibilities. I now appreciated those initially perceived limitations on a deeper and more profound level. The experience – not the thinking about the experience – led me from “Why should I do this?” to “Of course I should do this! There much more here than meets the eye.” Lived well, the experience community life and commitment expanded the vocation instead of closing it in.

Similarly, sometimes a trusted formator might intentionally say or do something to help others think more broadly about their formative experience. Many years ago, my own novice master, who I liked and respected, did that when once I asked him permission for something. He said no, and I began to walk away. He called me back and said, “You always say thank you when I say YES to a permission to do something outside of the house. Why don’t you thank me when I say NO?” What a strange thing to ask. Yet that little seed started a whole new line of thinking for me. It made me a little upset, but it also led to some really good insights about my personal and spiritual life. My novice master was being a novice master.

The ministry of formation is an extension of God’s work. Remember De La Salle’s own experience: God works imperceptibly and over a long period of time, so that one decision leads to the next, until we finally come to understand the direction we must go.

There is one other saying from the Fathers of the Desert that I would like to share with you. It addresses the challenge of having unwelcome “thoughts” that interfere with your personal or spiritual life. Here is the story: “A brother came to Abba Poemen and said: Abba, a variety of thoughts are coming into my mind, and I am in danger. The old man took him out in the air and said: Open your robe and take hold of the wind. And he answered: No, I cannot do it. The old man said: If you cannot do it, neither can you prevent those thoughts from coming in. But what you should do is to stand firm against them.”²¹ Some challenges cannot be avoided and are part of being human. The way to deal with them is to develop habits or rules-of-life that lean you into the direction that you want to go, or that enables you to stand firm against those things that you do not want to do. Sometimes this means going through the challenge and sometimes it means moving in the opposite direction. Discernment in experience is key.

When I was smoking quite a bit while still a young Brother, I tried to quit many times, but it didn’t work. Finally, I resolved that every time I thought of having a cigarette, I would recall the Holy Presence of God until the feeling passed. For some weeks, I became very holy! And eventually the desire for smoking completely left me and has never returned. A simple example perhaps, but you get the idea.

It is the personal habits that you cultivate which become the scaffold around which your spiritual life grows. Each of us develops spiritual habits that sustain us within our vocation, most of them described in our Rule. There may also be personal prayers and devotions, meditation times that are not with the community, or practices such as making sure that new people who come to the house are welcomed. All such habits change over time and deserve regular attention. For me, over the years I have come to really appreciate the Jesus prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” It has become a familiar habit for me, whether walking or driving or doing other things. (It is also very helpful when I am at the dentist, and he is working on my teeth, or during a particularly turbulent plane ride.)

The habit of reading a variety of books, magazines, websites, etc. can also make a difference, and not just focusing on spiritual topics. While the best books for your spiritual journey are the New Testament, the Rule, and the meditations of De La Salle, books and other resources about history, literature, sociology, and so on – even novels – help feed your soul and, through you, the souls of others. Of course, the same can be said of online videos – lectures, talks, and presentations. And when other recommend books or videos to you, they deserve more than cursory attention because they may be a providential invitation to explore something new or needed.

Finally, each of us should take the time to think about our spiritual habits, our spiritual goals, and our spiritual obstacles. Perhaps write them down, and then come back to that list regularly to stay focused and honest with yourself. Since we know that every activity we do involves rules and principles that help us do it well, the same must be said about our vocation and our role as formators.

The quotation from De La Salle that is my personal favorite is one that sums things up for me, whether it comes to formation responsibilities, our own spiritual lives, or our ministry involvement. It is a fitting thought that may guide you as your move forward on your own personal spiritual journeys.

“Be satisfied with what you can do, since this satisfies God, but do not spare yourself in what you can do with the help of grace. Be convinced that, provided you are willing, you can do more with the help of God’s grace than you imagine.”²²

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¹ Nomura, Yushi. *Desert Wisdom: Sayings from the Desert Fathers*, Doubleday, NY. 1982. p. 1.

² Ibid., p. 49.

³ Proverbs: 9:10

⁴ Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder*, Crossroad, NY, 1985. p. 3.

⁵ St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mt Carmel*, Bk 1, Ch 13, Nos. 11

⁶ 1 John 4:16

⁷ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 1974. Ch. 15.

⁸ John Paul II, Encyclical [*Dominum et vivificantem*](#), 1986, # 50.

⁹ Nomura, op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁰ Blain, Jean-Baptiste. *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*. Translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC. Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Conference, 1983, Vol. 1, Bk. 1, pp. 60-61.

¹¹ De La Salle, John Baptist. *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, p. 8.

¹² De La Salle, John Baptist. *The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle*. Translated by Coleman Molloy, FSC, edited by Augustine Loes, FSC, p. 248.

¹³ *Interior Prayer*, p. 51.

¹⁴ *Interior Prayer*, p. 97.

¹⁵ Fox, Matthew. *Creativity*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House, NY, 2002, p. 170.

¹⁶ McCabe, Herbert. "A Long Sermon for Holy Week." *New Blackfriars* 67 (1986), p. 56.

¹⁷ There is an article that I wrote for *AXIS* journal which covers a lot of this ground: *Twenty-First Century Lasallian Education: Where Technology Meets Albert Borgmann and De La Salle*. And here are some of the resources that I have found helpful: Adam L. Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017); Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A*

Philosophical Inquiry (University of Chicago Press, 1987); Bianca Bosker, “The Binge Breaker” in *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 2016 [Retrieved from <https://theatlntc.com/2016/11/20/the-binge-breaker/>]; David Brooks, “Intimacy for the Avoidant” in *The New York Times*, 7 October 2016. [Retrieved from <https://nyti.ms/2JZ69Zv>]; Ross Douthat, “Resist the Internet” in *The New York Times*, 11 March 2017 [Retrieved from <https://nyti.ms/2JZ69Zv>]; Claudia Dreifus, “Why We Can’t Look Away from Our Screens” in *The New York Times*, 6 March 2017 [Retrieved from <https://nyti.ms/2HdnGzr>]; Richard Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Finding God Amid the Noise of Modern Life* (Ligouri Publications, 2007); Anthony Spadaro & Maria Way, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Andrew Sullivan, “I Used to Be a Human Being” in *New York Magazine*, 19 September 2016. [Retrieved from <https://slct.al/2JcNvMK>]; Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015); Daniella Zsupan-Jerome, *Connected toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age* (Collegeville, MN : Liturgical Press, 2014).

¹⁸ The phrase comes from Abraham Joshua Heschel’s description of a teacher: “Everything depends on the person who stands in the front of the classroom. The teacher is not an automatic fountain from which intellectual beverages may be obtained. He is either a witness or a stranger. To guide a pupil into the promised land, he must have been there himself. When asking himself: Do I stand for what I teach? Do I believe what I say? he must be able to answer in the affirmative. What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but text people. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget.” *I Asked for Wonder*, op. cit., pp. 62-63.

¹⁹ Tio Colliander, *On a Resolute and Sustained Purpose*.

www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2015/02/on-resolute-and-sustained-purpose.html

²⁰ Conversation with Janet Ruggiero, AFSC, retired Director of Board Formation for the SFNO District.

²¹ *Desert Wisdom*, p. 78.

²² De La Salle, John Baptist. *Reflections on Their State and Employment That the Brothers Should Make from Time to Time, Especially During Retreat*, “Regarding the Use of Time,” # 10, in *Collection of Various Short Treatises*.