

Simple Attention and the Spirit of Faith¹

Joseph F. Schmidt, FSC²

In the *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, Saint La Salle presents us a method of prayer which at first seems to be excessively elaborate and unnecessarily systematic. On closer examination, however, it turns out to contain in itself a wide variety of options which can be used to adapt, abridge or finally to disregard the entire method altogether. Rather than outlining a rigid form of prayer, the *Explanation* provides the Brothers with a means to "do something" during the time of interior prayer until "prayer" begins to happen within them; that is, until they can become sensitive to recognizing and giving themselves to the Spirit. Among the suggestions which Saint La Salle mentions in the *Explanation* to help the Brothers respond to the Holy Spirit during the time of interior prayer, one seems to be particularly significant to the Founder, namely, the prayer of *simple attention*.

Saint La Salle describes *simple attention*³ as the way which "belongs to the stage of those who are proficient in interior prayer," and we must include the saint himself in this category. From his writings and lifestyle, we have every reason to assume that some form of *simple attention* was part of the prayer of the Founder particularly during those nights when, according to his biographers, he was completely absorbed in prayer. Also, he most likely anticipated that the Brothers themselves would attain to this kind of prayer if they remained faithful to their vocation. Finally, and most importantly, the prayer of *simple attention* was significant to the Founder because of its intimate connection to the spirit of the Institute, the *spirit of faith*.

Simple attention, Saint La Salle writes, "consists of being before God with a simple, interior view of faith that He is present..." It "consists in remaining (in this presence) with a profound interior respect ... a spirit of silent worship, of love, of admiration, of gratitude and thanksgiving, of self-abasement and a heartfelt desire to unite oneself with our Lord..." In *simple attention*, "we remain in this attitude of worship and adoration, without reasoning nor expressing ourselves ... in formal acts, and simply holding to a spirit of pure, devout, and affectionate attention."

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. Since his personal style was to rely on his own experience as the basis from which to teach the Brothers, it is unlikely that he would have ever mentioned *simple attention* if he had not personally experienced it. Nor is there a compelling reason why he would have included the description of this way of prayer in his practical manual of interior prayer unless he knew from experience that *simple attention* was a form of prayer to which the Brothers themselves would quite likely be drawn. He refers to *simple attention* as a prayer style which is a "great grace" but which is available to "many souls." Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila seem to estimate in terms of months rather than years, the time that it might take for faithful religious to be gifted with this particular form of prayer.

Saint La Salle assumes that if the Brothers remain faithful to the practice of interior prayer they would gradually no longer need to occupy themselves with the numerous “acts” which the *Explanation* describes,⁴ but move to a form of prayer in which there were fewer but long-continued reflections, and then to a state where they would “simply collect themselves interiorly, direct their thoughts to the presence of God, and very quickly find themselves fixed in this holy exercise.” Thus, they would come to experience *simple attention* to “the presence and action of God,” during at least some of this time of interior prayer. Specifically, Saint La Salle suggests that, within the time of interior prayer, the Brothers might experience the prayer of *simple attention* “for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, more or less.”

By describing the “time-frame” of *simple attention* in this way, Saint La Salle situates it within the overall time allotted to formal interior prayer. However, it is apparent that he anticipated that the influence of *simple attention* would flow over into the daily lives of the Brothers. In describing the second part of interior prayer, the consideration of the subject matter proper to the interior prayer – in this case a particular virtue – Saint La Salle remarks that “this method of simple attention, when accompanied by the proper dispositions, attracts the soul gently and effectually to the practice of the virtue....”⁵ The flow of prayer over into daily life comes from the gentle attraction for good which the soul feels in the experience of the prayer of *simple attention*. This attraction to the practice of virtue is the result of “remaining in the presence of our Lord” with the disposition of “worship and adoration, without reasoning ... simply holding to the spirit of pure, devout, and affectionate attention.” From the prayer of *simple attention* practiced during the time of interior prayer comes the gentle attractive force empowering the Brothers throughout the day to practice the “virtue which has been the subject of our interior prayer.”

The connection between *simple attention* and the cultivation of virtue is not, therefore, so much the result of a pious strategy calculated during the time of interior prayer or even of a firm resolution adopted as a result of the prayer. Rather, the connection is found in the perduring gentle attractive force for good which flows from the awareness of the presence of God and which now begins to replace our attachment to self-will. This attractive force arising in the time of *simple attention* becomes the force of the Spirit to motivate our daily actions.

Although Saint La Salle’s example is specific to the practice of a “virtue,” it is clear that the Founder is alluding to the overarching influence which this gentle attractive force will exert on all the activities of daily life as a result of the experience of *simple attention*. Implicitly here is the interrelatedness between *simple attention* and the *spirit of faith*, for this attractive force flowing from the awareness of the presence of God experienced in the prayer of *simple attention* is at the heart of the *spirit of faith*.

As described by Saint La Salle, this gentle attractive force has two aspects: that of adherence to God and that of detachment from self. He names them “purity” and “detachment,” and describes them as empowering the Brothers to “look on creatures only in their relation to God” and “without any particular view or any reference to self.”

These characteristics of the gentle attractive force for good flowing from *simple attention* are the characteristics of the *spirit of faith*. Saint La Salle anticipated that the Brothers would bring to

their daily lives the attractive force for good which they experienced in *simple attention*: the attraction “to look on creatures only in their relation to God, and consequently appreciated in them only what is of God.” This attractive force flowing from the experience of *simple attention* in interior prayer is the attitude called *spirit of faith* when it relates to the daily lives of the Brothers. For Saint La Salle, the *spirit of faith* is *simple attention* “in action.”

During the formal time of interior prayer, *simple attention* to the presence of God is explicit: the mind and the imagination are filled explicitly with images of God or are explicitly opened to God. In the daily experiences of life, the *spirit of faith* does not necessarily fill explicitly the mind and imagination with God’s presence, since frequently they must be occupied explicitly with the task at hand. But the prevailing attitude is the same in both *simple attention* and the *spirit of faith*: in both there is “a spirit of silent worship, of love, of admiration, of gratitude and thanksgiving, of self-abasement,” of “thinking only of Him and what concerns His service and acting for Him alone.” Basically, the *spirit of faith* is, in the context of the daily lives of the Brothers, what *simple attention* is in the context of the time for interior prayer.

One indication, therefore, by which the Brothers would know that the *spirit of faith* was developing within them would be that the gentle attractive force for good they experienced within themselves during the prayer of simple attention was the same attitude which they now found in themselves in their relationship to the events of daily life. They would begin to experience “gratitude and thanksgiving,” rather than being judgmental in their relationships with persons and events; “a spirit of silent worship” rather than greed or self-aggrandizement; “self-abasement and a heartfelt desire to unite oneself with our Lord” rather than a desire for success, vindictiveness, or avoidance of pain, in the face of the daily tasks and struggles of life. In short, they would find themselves more and more led by “a strong and supernatural affection” for the virtue and more-and-more able to “overcome with ease, the opposition of our vicious nature.” At the same time, they would find themselves less-and-less under Jesus’ criticism of Peter: “Get out of my sight, you Satan! ... You are not judging by God’s standards but by man’s.”⁶

It seems that Saint La Salle anticipated that the Brothers would be enlightened by the prayer of *simple attention* to look upon everything with the eyes of faith; that they would be empowered with the courage to do everything for God; and that they would receive the capacity to attribute all to God.⁷ And that this growth in the *spirit of faith* would come about not through some personal clever strategy or series of resolutions, but by that gentle attractive force for good which flows from prayer of *simple attention*.

¹ This article was previously published in *Lasalliana* #5 (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1985).

² The late Brother Joseph Schmidt, who was a member of the Lasallian District of Eastern North America (DNA), was for many years a spiritual director of some repute. Along with Brothers Miguel Campos, Frederick Mueller and William Mann, he founded the Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies when he was serving as Director of Formation for the USA/Toronto Region of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

³ Cf. “Attending to the Presence of God by Simple Attention” in *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer* by John Baptist de La Salle, translated by Richard Arnandez FSC, and edited by Donald Mouton FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1995), pages 51-56.

⁴ For more information about the 21 acts proposed by the Founder, cf. *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer* (Lasallian Publications, 1995). [1st Part of the Method: faith, adoration, thanksgiving, humility, remorse, contrition, application, union with Our Lord, invocation of the Spirit of Our Lord; 2nd Part of the Method: faith, adoration, thanksgiving, remorse, contrition, application, union with Our Lord, petition, invocation of the saints; & 3rd Part of the Method: review, thanksgiving, offering]

⁵ Cf. “Consideration by Simple Attention” in *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer* (Lasallian Publications, 1995), pages 122-125.

⁶ Mark 8:33.

⁷ Cf. “The Spirit of Faith” in *Collection of Various Short Treatises* by John Baptist de La Salle, translated by William J. Battersby FSC, and edited by Daniel Burke FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1993), pages 30-31.