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A Lasallian Practice:  
The presence of God



## Introduction

It was the beginning of October. I had spent the whole day in Providence on the east coast of the United States. Accompanied by Br. Charles Kitson I had visited educational and school centres fully devoted to young people being personally and socially reconstructed.

The evening was drawing to a close when Br. Charles invited me to spend two hours with him and a group of a dozen mothers, in a centre of the neighbourhood.

Every week these women take two hours from their meagre personal time in order to meet, far from family pressure and the haunting cares of work, management, education. These are women who have been through hard times and who have considerable lived experience. For two hours - in the presence of Br. Charles, who barely intervened - they listened to each other, encouraged each other, jostled each other, cried, played, laughed... then they prayed out loud, sharing their worries, their anguish, imploring, giving thanks... it was life flowing like water.

When it was time for us to leave they asked me, "What have you to say to us?" I replied, "Why do you meet each week in the presence of the Brother?" As if it were obvious, they replied: "The Brother taught us the presence of God. Now we know what the presence of God means; and wherever we are or whatever we are doing we know that He is there and we have learned to speak to Him in every circumstance. That is what is meant by being Lasallian and we are Lasallians."

A magnificent experience which expresses one of the strongest characteristics and which is our common Lasallian heritage.

In the course of my travels around the Institute I am more and more struck by the persistence of this custom in which we recall the presence of God at the beginning of classes or activities; both with adults and with the young.

Some years ago some of us might have thought that this practice had disappeared, carried away by the many changes which had affected our societies. I notice on the contrary that the custom has

acquired new vigour almost everywhere with the exception of Europe which has been strongly warped by a secularisation which is suspicious without exception of all dogmas of revealed religions and of the needs for spirituality which are at the heart of every human person.

Wherever I come across it, this practice presents itself as a short, simple, spontaneous invitation, which uses varied and adapted forms. It is a proposition made to persons who commit themselves to it according to their degree of spiritual adherence. It gives a kind of breath to the action and educates both young and adults by little imperceptible touches: each one gets back into his centre, where his heart is. Perhaps he will be touched? Perhaps... perhaps not... what does it matter, there is no hurry. The fruits will appear soon - tomorrow - in 10, 20, 30 years... it is the secret of hearts of which the educator needs to know nothing.

Br. Jacques Goussin, a French specialist on the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, knows the texts of our Founder very well. He enthusiastically agreed to show us all that John Baptist de La Salle wished to say through this practice of recalling the presence of God and how much he made it into an authentic path of spirituality - simple, accessible to all, common to both the young and their educators.

The contribution of Br. Jacques Goussin is sufficient in itself. However he wished to have it prefaced by some present-day testimony from Lasallian educators. The District of California, on being asked, and Br. Luke Salm, happily responded to the request made to them. You will read these seven accounts which say, each in their own way, how this custom is lived today within educational action. And you will see that it is truly a source of nourishment accessible to all, proposed by our spiritual family to nourish the faith so that it will overflow into zeal.

I would like to thank Br. Jacques Goussin.

I would like to thank the Lasallians of California and of New York.

*Br. Nicolas Capelle*

## Testimonies

### The Presence of God & The Front Steps

**Br. George Van Grieken**

*(Brother George Van Grieken, FSC, is the Director of the Brothers' Community at Christian Brothers High School in Sacramento, California. He is a graduate of the Lasallian Leadership Institute, a presenter annually at the Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies, and a member of the District Mission Council).*

For the last year and a half, I have stood on the front steps of the school each morning to greet students as they arrive. What started as only a first-day-of-school occasion stretched into a week, then became a month, and finally turned into a daily ritual. Somewhat to my surprise, people began to express how much they appreciated the fact that I was there, rain or shine, foggy or fair, roasting or shivering. I quickly became a "fixture" in their daily routine of coming to school. They came to expect me to be there, and now I expect myself to be there as well, despite whatever other obligations and responsibilities await my attention that day. When I stop to think about it, the situation calls to mind our Lasallian prayer: "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God." Not only am I remembering and encountering the presence of God in those entrusted to our care each and every day, but in a very small way I am a reminder to others of how God is present in their lives each and every day, rain or shine, foggy or fair, and they have a choice of whether or not to recognize it, pay attention to it, and perhaps even encounter it.

The Lasallian invocation "Let us remember..." that begins each prayer and many activities in the Lasallian world has such evocative power for us because it's something that has grown to become both familiar to hear and challenging to do. On the one hand, it is something that we hear so often that we rarely hear it at all. Like the greeting "Good Morning," it is easily dismissed as incidental, rote, and harmless; not something that requires real attention. On the other hand, if taken seriously, "Let us remem-

ber..." may be quite challenging, calling for an authentic and active awareness of God's presence within a particular context. Ideally, when we use that invocation, we should take a few seconds to do what we are saying; that is, quietly remember that we are in the presence of God (Recall that De La Salle provides six ways to do this in his Method of Interior Prayer). Something rote is transformed into an invitation to be in a relationship. A similar situation occurs with the common polite question, "How are you?" When Kathryn Hepburn was asked that question, she would frequently respond: "Fine, if you don't ask for details." Her rather clever response recognizes the fact that different levels of encounter are possible when certain words or phrases are bounced between individuals. We make a choice of either taking these words or phrases seriously or simply moving on. And most of the time, no matter the words, we simply move on.

In my early morning greetings to students, one of the reasons for my growing involvement was the fact that something rote quickly became an invitation to be in relationship. You simply can't say "Good Morning" hundreds of times and mean it without something else going on at the same time. What at first was thought to be rather simple and non-consequential gradually became a personal challenge. The two or three-second encounters with each student arriving for school, done over a period of weeks and months, built up into genuine, if limited, relationships with readily identifiable personalities. Each person had a specific approach, response, or attitude toward being greeted. It came to the point where I would design a long-term strategy for certain individuals whose sole apparent interest seemed to be to build up my tolerance for rejection, a long-term strategy based on those brief daily observations of their personalities. Over a period of weeks or months, their defenses or shyness or simple lack of attention could be incrementally addressed until, at the right time, they could be stopped for a short, profitable conversation. After that, they were hooked and discovered that responding wasn't, and isn't, such a difficult thing after all. Key elements for success included knowing just when to greet them as they walked by, using the right inflection and loudness in one's greeting, learning their names, smiling, and so on. But the most important element was, and is, eye contact. Once others make eye contact, there has to be some reaction, because a lack of reaction or response at that point puts



the responsibility squarely into their court. The words and gesture now become a real invitation to them - all of a sudden it's no longer dismissible, it's personal.

The parallels with the way that God is present in our lives are no doubt fairly obvious. God also stands at the front steps of our lives, greeting us, rain or shine, foggy or fair.

God greets us daily in the people we meet, the situations we face, and even the challenges we encounter. C. S. Lewis wrote that God "whispers to us in our joys, speaks to us in our conscience, and shouts to us in our pain." And God's care is such that there is no giving up. Over a period of weeks or months, our defenses or shyness or simple lack of attention are incrementally addressed until, at the right time, we can be stopped for a short, profitable conversation. After that, we are hooked and discover that responding wasn't, and isn't, such a difficult thing after all. Once God has made "eye contact," the responsibility rests squarely in our court. God's words and gestures now become a real invitation for us - all of a sudden it's no longer dismissible, it's personal.

The interesting question of course is finding out where that crucial "eye contact" with God occurs in our lives. Is it liturgical, interpersonal, aesthetic, kinesthetic, communal, quasi-mystical, or is it more like paying attention to whatever, or whomever, is before us at any one time? I would venture that God's eye contact, God's presence that can't be ignored, is uniquely shaped to touch the heart of each individual - a familiar notion in the Lasallian world.

My short daily encounters with students each morning are a microcosm of teaching for me. They are also a daily, unpredictable, and rather intense encounter with the presence of God. The wide spectrum of personalities, reactions, situations, and short conversations carry a life that shines out with the richness of God's grace even as they also sometimes reflect a genuine hunger for that same grace. I've been blessed by the experience - in fact have become rather addicted to it, I'm afraid - and at the same time I continue to find myself stretched and challenged in unforeseen ways. But that's no doubt part of taking an encounter with the presence of God seriously. There's no need for "Let us remember..."

"Most Christians look upon decorum and politeness as merely human and worldly qualities and do not think of raising their

minds to any higher view by considering them as virtues that have reference to God, to their neighbor, and to themselves... [Teachers] should carefully lead them to be motivated by the presence of God... In other words, children should do these things out of respect for God in whose presence they are." - Preface of *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*.

"Do you act in such a way as to have as much kindness and affection for those you teach?... The more tenderness you have for the members of Jesus Christ and of the Church who are entrusted to you, the more God will produce in them the wonderful effects of his grace." (Meditation 134.2)

## The Holy Presence of God

**Ms. Deb Fagan**

*Ms. Deb Fagan is an Admissions Counselor and mathematics teacher at Totino-Grace High School in Fridley, Minnesota. She participated in CIL in October and November 2004 and is a graduate of the Lasallian Leadership Institute.*

I can remember the first time I recognized the Presence of God. It was the summer before I entered the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and I was a camper at Waves of Fun church camp. One night during chapel I experienced God in a way I had not known before. I was raised a Christian and learned "Jesus Loves You" at a young age, but this was different. It was like I realized for the first time that God's love was for me. From that point on my faith became my own, a true confirmation, so to speak. I no longer attended church, prayed and communed because I was supposed to, but rather because I chose to. I accepted the vows my parents had made at my baptism and truly took responsibility for my own relationship with God.

That youthful experience was moving and powerful to say the least; in fact, it is what was referred to at camp as a "mountaintop experience." I have found "mountaintop experiences" to be enlightening on my faith journey through life. Generally, "mountaintop experiences" are times of retreat and reflection where prayer and spirituality are explored. When I am "at the top," I am

able to look back and reflect on where I have come from and how far I have journeyed. Through easy and difficult times, through failures and success, I thank God that I've made it this far. On the mountaintop, I also have the opportunity to see what lies before me. There are a lot of things I do not yet know, and although the vastness is overwhelming, it is also exciting. However, I realize that virtually nothing grows on the mountaintop. It is down in the valleys where the meadows boast of fragrant flowers, the deer drink from the bubbling streams and where life is growing and green. I cannot live on the mountaintop, but I can reenergize from these experiences.

The Presence of God is evident on the mountaintop, but what about in everyday life? Can God be present and experienced in the life I lead from day to day? Now, 20 years since first experiencing the Presence of God, I know the answer is yes. God is not only present when we seek to experience and be close to God, but God is present always. As a Lasallian educator, I begin class daily with the words, "Let us quiet ourselves and remember that we are in the Holy Presence of God." It is in quieting myself during my busy and often hectic schedule that I can recognize God's presence. I see God in the joys and pains that my students share during prayer in class. I see God in the laughter of my toddler and the cry of my newborn son. God is present in the gentle rain, in the changing of seasons and the raging seas. God is waiting for me, for you, for us... to remember.

And so let us quiet ourselves and remember that we are in the Holy Presence of God.

Let us remember that we are in the Holy  
Presence of God...

**Br. Larry Schatz**

*Brother Larry Schatz, FSC, is the President of San Miguel Middle School of Minneapolis, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is also a presenter at the Lasallian Social Justice Institute. He also serves his District on the Mission and Ministry Council.*

How many times have I heard and said those words in my 25 years as a Brother? I never get tired of them, though, because they

really are a powerful reminder of what we Lasallians are called to. What I love about this phrase is that it is always true, that it can never not be true.

As I go through my day at San Miguel Middle School, the Presence of God looms large. God's Presence is most evident – and at times, most challenging— in the faces of our students. They are full of energy, full of potential. They are the reason I do what I do, and their success is what the founding of this new Lasallian ministry is about. They keep me grounded. They are dynamic manifestations of God's Presence.

The staff is another powerful reminder of the Holy Presence. These dedicated individuals are there for one reason only: to serve the young people entrusted to our care. Their commitment, their hard work, their patience, their simple loving presence is what sets San Miguel apart. Each of them, in his and her own way, shows forth the Presence of God. They are witnesses to God's compassion.

I look out of our big classroom windows, and see the world "out there". Nature – no matter what time of year— is a constant reminder to me of the Presence of God. In fact, sometimes the image of a bright moon in the winter sky, the warm sun flowing through classroom windows, and the huge trees that line our block all call me to pause and to gaze in wonder. Wonder at the wonder-full God who seems to shout Presence on almost every street corner.

Today we celebrated the Feast of San Miguel, and during our mass, there were so many reminders of the Presence of God. In the Eucharist, of course, but also in the voices of the students serving as lectors, singers, and musicians. In the faces and presence of our supporters who came to celebrate with us, and without whose support we would not exist. In the retired Brothers who braved the winter weather to join us as we honored St. Miguel. And the church building itself, an older church filled with soaring arches and lovely stained glass, exudes a sense of reverence that calls to mind the abiding Presence of God.

Two of our volunteers received awards to recognize their many hours of volunteer service, and both men brought with them their wives and children. And in the faces of those little ones, God was

clearly smiling and reminding us of the great blessing that children are as they call us to take delight in the little things.

As the school day ended, parents and relatives came to pick up their children, and their dedication to their children and their love for them is yet another reminder of the Holy Presence of God.

The wonderful thing about the words "Let us remember..." is that they call us simply to open our eyes to what is already surrounding us— the Holy Presence of God. God doesn't come to us; rather we come to God by being present to the Presence, by allowing ourselves to gaze in wonder at the countless manifestations of God's Presence in the course of a single school day.

## The Presence of God

**Br. Ed Siderewicz**

*Brother Ed Siderewicz is the President and co-founder of the San Miguel Schools in Chicago, Illinois. He is a current Lasallian Leadership Institute participant.*

I sometimes feel God's presence in moments of inspiration or comfort; I also sometimes feel God's presence via God's absence, a feeling of being left alone, a feeling of abandonment. It is like a masterful piece of music, the genius of which comes from its well-placed silences as well as its well-arranged notes. When the notes and silences are placed side-by-side, they have the power to take one out of oneself and transcend the moment.

There have been several moments recently that have given me reason to pause and reflect. These are stories of our San Miguel students and stories that have touched my heart, stories that have challenged me, stories that have inspired me, stories that make me grateful, stories about lives which reflect for me the presence of God - sometimes via a sign of the resurrection, sometimes via the presence of evil. These are stories of kids who come from impoverished neighborhoods that have the highest dropout rates in the state, and among the highest in the United States.

The first story is when Jameshia, one of our spunky 5<sup>th</sup> grade students, passed by my office one day last week. She saw me working quietly at the desk, came right in, put her arm around me, and

asked me how it was going. "Great", I said "and what about you, Jameshia, are you shooting for the stars today?" Without skipping a beat, Jameshia charmed me with her smile and with full confidence replied "I'm shooting beyond the stars". A great attitude for a young girl who entered San Miguel several years behind grade level.

Another story is when I was talking with one of our teachers, Renee Clark. During the course of our conversation, Renee said: "Brother Ed, I have to tell you something. Yesterday, Carey Gates (one of our 6<sup>th</sup> graders) came up to me and told me she wanted to study at Michigan State University one day." As Renee continued giving me the details, she started welling up with tears. You see, Carey started at San Miguel last year in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, performing between a 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level. She also has needs of a special education student. The inspirational thing here is that Carey is giving it everything she has and somehow she has come to believe that she could end up studying at one of the top universities in the country. I left inspired not only by Carey, but also by Renee being inspired by Carey.

Another incident happened last week three blocks away from our Back of the Yards campus. In the middle of the afternoon while we were still in school, we saw and heard three helicopters flying overhead and unsettling messages quickly reached us. There were multiple shootings three blocks from school. This is a story that is beginning to sound like a worn-out record. You could predict the script. Though nobody really had many details, including the 5:00 pm news that reported it as their lead story, the common word on the street was that a van had run over a gang member repeatedly, hit a fire hydrant which opened up and flooded 47<sup>th</sup> street - a major artery - and caused havoc, and some cars started shooting at each other.

While this was happening, one of our teachers happened to be at the dentist's office on 47<sup>th</sup> street, right beside where this incident was taking place. She came back to relate some of the gory details of the gang warfare, including 2-3 young men who were shot and killed. The most unsettling thing of it all? Nothing in the newspapers the next morning... nobody in the 'hood was talking about it... nobody even seemed to be inquiring what happened or any other details. The entire incident seemed to get pushed under-

ground and blocked out of consciousness. The devil has dulled our senses. Despite this culture of death, I see daily examples of courageous students and teachers that daily are signs of the resurrection.

This next story brought me to tears. The day before Thanksgiving, one of our teachers asked students to write an essay with the lead "I Am Thankful For..." One student by the name of Shaquille, all 4 foot of him, responded with clarity and wisdom:

*"I am thankful for God. God is the one I am thankful for. If God wasn't real and just we were, I would have no one to take care of me. My mom died and I don't know where my father is. So my cousin is taking care of me. That's why I'm thankful for God."*

The inspirational thing here is that when Shaq comes into school in the morning, he frequently will hug his teachers rather than shake their hands. And it is a hug with lots of affection. My question is how can a 10 year-old who has taken some pretty significant wounds in his life, folded them into who he is and what he wants to become, be loving and compassionate with no apparent signs of an edge, and be grateful for what he has?

Yet another story is about José Lagunas, a San Miguel graduate now studying at Lewis University. José stood up recently at a Latino Conference at Lewis and delivered an introduction that was most inspirational. He began:

*The time for excuses is over! The time to point fingers is dead, and from the ashes, a maturity must rise. From those ashes we must take control of our fate and break the cycle we are, as Latinos, placed in. We are expected to drop out, join gangs, and die before the age of 18 with our 15 minutes of fame in the obituaries. No excuses!*

*Coming in as Latinos, we're already at a disadvantage. We are in a struggle for survival with our hands weighed down with weight, heavy enough to prevent any fair chance.*

*Now, there are two struggles we are in right now. One is the battle against racism. A struggle against "Can you speak English?" But the other is a much greater struggle. It's against ourselves. We need to be able to step back and look at ourselves critically. We need to first of all, pull our pants up and check that gang garbage at the*

*door. We need to be taken seriously. We are gonna be a joke until we realize how stupid it is to die over colors. No excuses.*

*We are in this together, and we need to start taking responsibility for our actions. I'm telling you, the opportunity to go to college is in your hands. As the generations go on we need to make progress in all aspects of our lives. We need to shoot for the stars instead of settling for "barely making ends meet." In this case, the stars include being doctors, lawyers, anything.*

Finally, I was chatting last week with Fr. Brigham, the pastor of Our Lady Help of Christians - the parish in which San Miguel's Gary Comer campus is located. We were walking down the hall in school and he was looking at the photos of our 7<sup>th</sup> graders that adorn the hall. He stopped half-way down the hall, started laughing, and talking about just how far these kids have come in just over two years. Then Fr. Brigham said something that was both profound in its simplicity yet revealing of the truth:

*"These kids are normal... they are just normal kids... but that is an extraordinary thing for these kids."*

Light over darkness... the resurrection laughing at death... the poor are having the *Good News* preached to them... the last are becoming first. God's presence and the Spirit of the Living God are alive and well in our world today, and acting powerfully through the very beautiful gift of our Lasallian charism.

## Green Grass Sign of Faith

**Ms. Rory Dorman**

*Ms. Rory Dorman Tira is a Spanish teacher at Christian Brothers High School in Sacramento, California. She is a graduate of the Lasallian Leadership Institute and serves on the Advisory Board for the Lasallian Social Justice Institute.*

I work at a large, Catholic high school in a not-so-good neighborhood. It's not so desperately poor that you've never seen anything like it. You have. But nor is it the kind of place you'd want to spend much time. Or need to. It's the kind of neighborhood that people drive around, not through, unless they have a reason to be there. The kind of neighborhood some kids try to make it out of,



and other kids are taught to stay away from. On hot days it seems oppressive, and on gray days it seems grim. The rest of the time, it sort of just gets by - much like a lot of the folks who live there.

The signs are obvious and familiar: bars on the windows, empty lots, occasional boarded up homes, corner liquor stores, subsidized housing, and Spanish billboards for beer. You see lots of families with young children, a rainbow immigrant community, and plenty of people doing their best and calling this home. Lots of baby strollers and young moms, occasional low-flying helicopters, and sadly, lots of sirens. Always, too many sirens. But today, there was a pure kind of silence in the middle of this neighborhood. Something extraordinary happened. And it wasn't the first time.

Well over a thousand people, mostly teenagers, assembled on a giant, perfectly manicured lawn. (This alone merits recognition. Green grass is hard to come by along this concrete boulevard, though rose bushes seem to bloom from the dirt in front of many homes). The crowd wasn't organized into tight rows or aisles. There was no system to the seating except that all the kids were on beach towels and picnic blankets; a giant patchwork of packs of friends. Slumped together, back to back, some people's heads resting on other people's knees and laps when they could get away with it. Guys, girls, all of them squished together, cozier and closer than most adults would want to be. A big tangled web of teenagers, hanging out on the grass, mostly-quiet in the mid-morning sun. And then they began to pray.

In silence.

In unison.

And with beautiful music.

And when they do this, when we do this (as I am part of this crowd), I like to imagine that I am instead on the sidewalk. That maybe I live in this neighborhood and I am walking, say, from the market, or to the bus stop, or I'm on my way to the Laundromat. And as I pass by the parking lot and black gates, I hear something and I turn. And there, like it's the last thing one might imagine to see, is a gathering over a thousand strong, in quiet prayer, in the middle of this perfectly ordinary Thursday morning. I like to wonder, what would I think if I saw this? What do they think? Does somebody hear us? See us? Notice the grace? Do our voices reach to the corner?

I want them to.

We're not muffled by a roof and the walls of a chapel or a gymnasium. No high hedges or brick walls to keep us "in" and the neighborhood "out." We're right out there on the grass, not more than 100 yards from the street, from the baby strollers, the liquor stores, and the sirens. Sometimes I like to think we're praying with the neighbors; a kind of "come-as-you-are" invitation to prayer. I want the neighbors to hear with us the comfort in the priest's words, "Grant us peace in our day." I want them to say with us, "It is right to give God thanks and praise." I want this patchwork blanket of young people in prayer to gently stretch over the gates and down the block.

As teachers in this school, we are asked to see the face of God. It is our duty, our good faith effort when we come to work each day. Often times I don't think about this. (Though I know it happens, I haven't always recognized it as this.) Sometimes this mission seems hard or abstract. Sometimes at 3 o'clock when you don't want to see a teenager again for at least another seventeen hours, it seems near impossible.

Today it seemed easy. We were the face of God having church on the lawn. Together, we were a giant, impossible-to-miss, sign of faith in the middle of a tired, run-down street in Sacramento. How could someone not have noticed?

## Always on Holy Ground

**Mr. Greg Kopra**

*Greg Kopra is the Assistant Director of the Office of Education for the District of San Francisco. He is a graduate of the Lasallian Leadership Institute, a presenter annually at the Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies, and a member of the District Mission Council.*

*Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God:  
But only those who see take off their shoes...*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning  
*Aurora Leigh* (1857), Book VII, line 820

*Wherever I go I will find you, my God;  
There is no place  
That is not honored by your presence.*

John Baptist de La Salle  
*Explanation of the Method of  
Interior Prayer* (1739), p. 59

August 24, 1983. The principal stood up, called us to order, and invited us to begin the meeting with a prayer. Silence fell over the teachers and staff assembled in the library. "Let us remember," he intoned, "that we are in the holy presence of God." Then he paused for some time so we could accept the invitation to remember. I found myself deeply moved - by the words, by the invitation, by the prayerful silence. And I began to reflect on his choice of words. *Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.* He did not say, "Let us *place ourselves* in God's presence," as if we were not already in God's presence. He did not say, "Let us *call upon God to be present* to us in all we do this school year," as if to say that God is only present when invited. No, he did not say these things. He said, ***Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.*** We are in the holy presence of God. Now, then, always. The challenge - the invitation - is to *remember* this reality. At that moment, I remembered, and I have never forgotten that experience.

For John Baptist de La Salle, remembering the presence of God is absolutely essential if teachers are to perform their educational duties well. He fills his writings with exhortations to remember God's presence. In the *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, he indicates that the recollection of the presence of God is the first step in preparation for prayer.<sup>1</sup> In a letter written to a Brother dated May 15, 1701, De La Salle says, "The remembrance of God's presence will be a great advantage in helping you and in inspiring you to do all your actions well."<sup>2</sup> He instructed the first Brothers to kneel beside their desk upon entering the classroom,

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<sup>1</sup>. *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, by John Baptist de La Salle, p. 25. Original Translation by Richard Arnandez, FSC; edited by and revised translation by Donald Mouton, FSC. 1995: Christian Brothers Conference, Landover, MD.

<sup>2</sup>. Letter 2: To a Brother. *The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle*, p. 20. Translation, Introduction, and Commentary by Brother Colman Molloy, FSC. Edited with Additional Commentary by Brother Augustine Loes, FSC. 1988: Christian Brothers Conference, Landover, MD.

make the sign of the cross, and remember God's presence. Every half hour, a student would ring a bell in class and another student stood up at his desk and said, "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God."<sup>3</sup> The message is clear: we are always standing on holy ground.

Why this focus on the presence of God? What difference does it make anyway? It has to do with finding what we are looking for. In his meditation for the feast of the Epiphany, De La Salle urges the Lasallians to "recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children" entrusted to their care.<sup>4</sup> See beneath the surface; look beyond the presentation. The "poor rags" of our students could be a disheveled appearance, misbehavior of some sort, an "attitude," apathy, cynicism... you get the point. If we look for trouble, we will find trouble. If we look for shortcomings, we will find shortcomings. On the other hand, if we look for promise, believing that a student has potential for success, we will find the key to unlock that student's potential. We must refuse to define the student by his or her behavior. We believe there is more - all we have to do is to keep looking.

Remembering and recognizing the presence of God is a distinguishing mark of a Lasallian school. In an age in which so many young people struggle with the poverty of low self-esteem, one of the greatest gifts we can give our students is to see their goodness before they even see it in themselves, to name their goodness, and to love them so effectively that they begin to believe in their own goodness. Remembering the presence of God reminds us of the limitless goodness and potential in each person we encounter. It keeps us focused on the good. Every encounter with a student is an encounter with God.

As time has passed since that day twenty years ago in the library, I have forgotten much of the content of the in-service. But I have come to understand that my wise principal had delivered a powerful lesson in teaching: before all else - before planning any lessons, before correcting any exams, before establishing any guidelines for classroom conduct, *remember the presence of God*. If we

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<sup>3</sup>. *Praying with John Baptist de La Salle*, p. 38. Carl Koch. 1990: Saint Mary's Press, Winona, MN.

<sup>4</sup>. Meditation 96.3. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*. Translated by Richard Arandez, FSC, and Augustine Loes, FSC. Edited by Augustine Loes, FSC, and Francis Huether, FSC. 1994: Christian Brothers Conference, Landover, MD.

fail to do this, we fail the students entrusted to our care. They deserve our reverence, our respect, our love, our concern.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning said it best: Earth's crammed with heaven. Amen.

## A traditional practice

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If there is one prayer that is familiar to Lasallians everywhere, Brothers, associates, teachers, students and former students, it is "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God." This prayer, or rather this invitation, derives from St. John Baptist de La Salle himself, who prescribed that it be invoked at certain times throughout the school day. It is significant that in the Founder's time it was used in the school situation as a reminder, usually voiced by a student, to the teachers and students of the significance of what they were doing in the educational enterprise. As such, the formula does not appear in the exercises of piety the Founder composed for the Brothers in their community prayer. All the more reason why it can easily become the signature Lasallian prayer for the associates and partners of the Brothers, as well as for their present and former students. There might be some benefit, then, both for the Lasallian partners and the Brothers, to revisit the origins out of which the tradition for this prayer arose, to offer some reflections on the theological implication of what it is we are asked to "remember", and finally some practical suggestions to help the prayer achieve its purpose.

The prayer is authentically Lasallian because it so perfectly reflects the distinctive spirituality of John Baptist de La Salle it might be said of De La Salle that he was constantly aware of the presence of God. Like Jesus himself, he often withdrew into solitude to devote long hours to prayer in the presence of God, either alone late at night or before the Blessed Sacrament, or during the spiritual retreats that he frequently made. In a list of resolutions he made on one such occasion, he determined that every time he traveled to a new location he would spend fifteen minutes concentrating on the presence of God in that place. When the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris threatened him with exile, he made

no objection. saying that he could find God anywhere. He saw God's presence in the events that affected him, whether for good or for ill, exclaiming characteristically "God be blessed!" On his death bed he prayed, adoring God present as a guide in all the events of his life.

If the life of the Founder was saturated with an awareness of the presence of God, so was that of the early Brothers. The primitive Rule of the Brothers was emphatic on the need to attend to the presence of God: "They shall pay as much attention as they can, to the holy presence of God, and take care to renew it from time to time. being well convinced that they should think only of Him and of what He ordains, that is of what concerns their employment" (Rule of 1718. Chapter 2, article 7). And again "They [the Brothers] shall kneel to adore God present in all parts of the house. on entering to stay and upon leaving, except in the parlor and the refectory..." (Ibid. Chapter 4, article 13). The Founder considered the presence of God as one of the four interior supports of his Institute (Ibid. Chapter 16, article 8).

The daily community schedule was designed to implement these principles In addition to morning and evening vocal prayer and a series of prayers at noonday, the Brothers devoted a half-hour before Mass in the morning and before dinner in the evening to meditative prayer. The Founder urged the Brothers to begin this period of prayer by placing themselves in the presence of God. offering them six ways in which to think of God as present: in a place, either 1) because God is everywhere, or 2) in the community gathered in God's name; in ourselves. either 3) as sustaining us in existence, or 4) by grace and the Holy Spirit; in church, 5) a; the house of God, or 6) by reason of the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. Depending on their capabilities, De La Salle suggested that the Brothers be attentive to God's presence either by multiplied reflections, by a few but prolonged reflections, or even by simple attention without reflections. (See his Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer, passim).

Finally, De La Salle's spirituality, his own and the spirituality he urged on his teachers was especially attentive to the presence of God in persons, first of all in themselves, as noted above, and then in a special way in the students entrusted to their care. The seal of the Institute with the star and the motto *Signum Fidei* (Sign of

faith) is a constant reminder of the founder's meditation for the feast of Epiphany. Since it was by faith that the Magi could recognize the presence of their King and God beneath the swaddling clothes and humble circumstances of the birth of Jesus, De La Salle writes: "Recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children who you have to instruct. Adore Jesus in them." Again, in the introduction to his Rules of Decorum he writes: "...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."

It should be remembered that the teachers De La Salle was addressing were simple men. They were barely educated without the formal training required of today's teachers. They were quite young, busy all day preparing lessons, with religious and manual duties in the community house, and then teaching in classrooms that might contain as many as 80 or 100 students. Yet De La Salle did not hesitate to ask them to make the presence of God in the community house, in the school, and in their lives as their constant preoccupation.

Lasallian spirituality is always apostolic, mystical realism as Michel Sauvage has called it. What is experienced through the spirit of faith overflows into zeal for the mission. Thus the presence of God recalled in the religious community was expected to carry over to the invitation to recall the presence of God in the Christian school. The Brothers were to bring their own sense of the presence of God to the school situation as something to be shared. In the context of our contemporary understanding of shared mission, the Lasallian teacher is invited to cultivate an awareness of the presence of God in her or his daily life.

The oft repeated "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God" is a reminder that sharing the mission includes sharing a constant awareness of the presence of the God in whose name the mission is carried out. It is an invitation to put God at the center of what goes on in the principal's office, the classroom, at faculty meetings, or Lasallian gatherings of any kind. Fortunately the use of that prayer seems to be more widespread now than in the recent past, linking the present generation of Lasallians to the generations that responded to the invitation over the course of more than 300 years.

The problem with any formula that is repeated so often is that it loses its meaning and may become something that can be taken lightly or treated as routine. A moment's thought might open up the implications of what the brief exhortation is asking us to do.

**Let us remember.** The word "remember" presumes that one is not addressing the presence of God for the first time. It implies that we, have forgotten something and of course we have. In the business of running a classroom or a school, in the rush to get to a staff meeting on time. or- while preparing to participate in a workshop God can hardly be at the forefront of our immediate concerns. Time out, then, to remember what and Who is central to the entire enterprise.

**We are in the holy presence.** "We" means each one of us, individually and together as a community. "We" also implies that we are persons and therefore the presence is a personal presence. Personal presence differs from the way we are present to things "the furniture" or even to other people with whom there is no personal relationship (as in crowd). Our awareness of the presence of God is the sort of person-to-person presence that Martin Buber would call an I-Thou encounter. And the presence is holy, in another word "awesome", because of the Person to whom we are present and we are made holy by recalling it.

**The holy presence of God.** We, who are limited in space and time, are being asked to grasp in faith and experience a real God who is outside, who is present not only to us but to God's entire created universe; the God who is absolute mystery and at the same time is at the very ground of our existence: the God whose very self is communicated in grace to us who are God's rational creatures. To remember the presence of God in that sense puts us in touch with the source of our identity as human persons and with the ultimate goal that is our eternal destiny.

Thus the invitation to remember the presence of God is an invitation to do some theology. Theology is not only for professionals. Theology is reflection (logos) on the mystery of God (Theos). Theology in this broad sense does not require seminary training or an academic degree. Theology can be sophisticated (Karl Rahner) or naive (a child writes letters to God), biblical (Father. Incarnate Son, Holy Spirit) or magisterial (Nicene Creed), intellectual and objective or prayerful and personal. Yet none of these theologies



can be adequate to the reality of the God that is its object. Even so, the invitation to remember the Presence of God is an invitation to reflect on who the God is in whose presence we find ourselves. Who is God as God? Who is God for me? For all of us gathered in a Lasallian meeting? For the students entrusted to us in the Lasallian mission? Such is the challenge when we use the words "presence" and "God" in the same breath. It takes some sort of preparation and effort if those words are to become the occasion for a genuine religious experience.

This gives rise to some practical questions about the use of this prayer that Lasallians who use it so often might want to consider. The principal question concerns the amount of time and spiritual energy needed if we ever hope to experience the faith that we are indeed in God's presence. It seems that some practices that have developed in the use of this prayer, militate against its having its full effect. Most of these concern the practice of developing a verbal response to the invitation. In some European countries the response to the invitation has become "and let us adore him" (et adorons le), an addition that does not date from the Founder's time. In at least one District in the USA, the response is followed immediately by the sign of the cross, even though the original practice in the schools was to have the sign of the cross come before the invitation to recall the presence of God. In some places recently, since the formula is so familiar, it has been broken up into the versicle-response format: V) "Let us remember" R) "That we are in the holy presence of God" The problem with all these practices is that they evoke an immediate vocal response that may leave little, or in some cases no time to reflect on what is being remembered.

For Lasallians today, perhaps the best model for this traditional prayer is what in time became known as the half-hour prayer. The "hour" prayer in the schools began with the sign of the cross, the invitation to recall God's presence, and was then followed by a somewhat extended vocal prayer. At the "half-hour" prayer, by contrast, a bell would tinkle, the invitation was expressed, followed by some moments of silence. This practice would seem best suited to the challenge of the invitation, to give time to let the awesome reality sink in, to make it a true prayer in personal contact with God. This would be similar to the advice given to the celebrant of the liturgy that, before expressing the content of a

prayer. there be a pause for silent reflection after the invitation "Let us pray" (Oremus). In these cases, silence is truly golden.

The pause in silence after the Lasallian "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God" could also allow for variation, longer or shorter periods, depending on the circumstances. In the classroom the pause would have to be relatively short. But in prayer services at Lasallian gatherings, or as an opening prayer at formal meetings, it could be somewhat more prolonged, terminating simply with "Live Jesus in our hearts." It might even be developed a bit and made more specific. For example, after the initial invitation and a suitable pause, the presider might say Let us think of God's presence in this room or this assembly. Even better, "Let us think of God's presence in one another, or some other person in this room, or even in oneself." Such variations would help overcome routine, provide that the initial invitation to recall God's presence be followed by a suitable period of silence.

Finally, it must be remembered that if this traditional Lasallian invitation is to be truly an experience of God's presence in prayer, it cannot rely on human ingenuity and effort alone. In the long run, every experience of prayer depends on the initiative and the action of God's Spirit within us. And once the Spirit has enabled us to pray in God's presence, it is the same Spirit that will give efficacy to our work in the Lasallian mission. As De La Salle himself reminds us in his Meditation for Pentecost: "You carry out a work that requires you to touch hearts, but this you cannot do except by the Spirit of God."

## Part One: The presence of God

### 1. A multiple presence

I had gone into a self-service run by Moroccans. I had filled my plate but when I came to the cash register there was no one present. I waited for a time that exceeded my patience (I was hungry) so that when the cashier returned I could not refrain from saying (even if it was half-smiling), "In your absence I was inclined to go through without paying". He looked at me seriously and then replied, "But, sir, up above you there is Someone who sees you". I don't know whether this person was a Muslim or a former student of the Brothers but I admired his faith, asking myself how many Frenchmen under the same circumstances would have made the same comment to me.

John Baptist de La Salle had received this sense of God's presence along with other principles of the school of Bérulle at the seminary of Saint Sulpice and he was so marked by it as to make it a specific exercise both for his own spirituality and for that of his Brothers.

1.1. It begins from a conviction of faith related to God's presence everywhere, giving priority to his omnipresence, a truth so wonderfully expressed by Psalm 139: "I believe, O my God, that wherever I go I will find you and there is nowhere which is not honoured by your presence" (Cl 14,38).

"Wherever I go, however far away and hidden from men's eyes, God is found there and His presence cannot be avoided": (Cl 14,7). "God is everywhere, He fills heaven and earth, which for all their extent, cannot enclose Him. He is in everything by their very nature" (Cl 20,16).

This last citation presents the concern to emphasise the natural character of God's omnipresence, a necessary effect of His essence: by the very fact that He is, He is everywhere. This kind of presence does not need any particular decision on His part, any willful act, or, to speak in human language, any effort, however small it might be. It is sufficient for Him **to be** to occupy the space.

This is not the case with other modes of the divine presence that could be called "intentional" because they depend on the sovereign design of God, such as Creation, Covenant or the Incarnation.

1.2. A consequence of the action of the Creator: "God is present in us to make us exist" and in glossing on the discourse of Saint Paul before the Aereopagus of Athens (Acts 17,28), John Baptist de La Salle continues, "We have being, movement and life because God is in us and communicates them to us for us to communicate them, in such a way that if God ceased to be in us and to give us our existence, we would fall into nothingness. What a grace God gives us therefore in making us part of Himself and by His residence in us making us who we are" (CL 14,12).

1.3. With regard to the Covenant, its first application is the real presence of God in the soul, something which is usually given the name of the divine indwelling: "God is in us by His grace and by His spirit according to what our Lord says in Luke 17 the Kingdom of God is in you. For it is by His Holy Spirit that God reigns in you, it is indeed by the residence of the Most Holy Trinity in you, according to what the same Jesus Christ says in Saint John 14,23, Whoever loves me keeps my word and my Father will love him and we will come and make our abode in him" (CL 15,16).

The Hebrew language, lacking as it does abstract expressions, concentrates and makes concrete the idea of 'presence' by the word "face", a word met with when it is applied to God in the Prophets and Psalms: "It is thy face, O Lord, that I seek" (Ps 27,8); "You hide your face and I am shattered" (Ps 30,8); "Shine on us the light of your face" (Ps 4,7).

But the Founder, whose vocabulary is enriched more from the New Testament than from the Old, has recourse to it only twice: "The Saints present our prayers to God and we should wish to be living holocausts before the Lord's face" (Med 184.2); "The very severity of the Judge who will render to each according to his works will act so that those who are present will not dare to see His face" (Med 1,1).

1.4. With **the Incarnation of his Word**, God gives himself through new ways of being present. Thus it is that "We can consider God present in the churches because Our Lord Jesus Christ is always

resident in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar; it is He who sanctifies the temples in which He is always really present to fill with graces those who adore Him; that is why it is right to attribute to these holy places these words of the Apocalypse: Here He has established His tabernacle among men and He will dwell with them and he will be their God" [Apoc 21,3] (CL 14,23).

But this humble dwelling, indicated only by a simple red lamp in no way exhausts the plan which has led the Paschal Lamb to become Bread and Wine. He wishes to be above all and before everything else, food. It is undoubtedly true that His presence in the body which receives the host lasts no longer than the time of the accidents: "When the appearances are destroyed in our stomach, Jesus Christ ceases to be in us in bodily form but He remains in us by His grace so long as we avoid offending God by mortal sin" (CL 20,248). The effects of communion are not, according to the words of Paul Claudel "things that have a beginning or an end". This can be seen in the request made in 'Instructions and Prayers': "By your presence in me, make me become now something quite other than what I am"(CL 17,271).

1.5. The sacramental presence of the Word incarnate in each of His disciples at the moment of communion simply makes personal his presence promised and realized in the Church which is His Mystical Body. "Our Lord says in Chapter 8 of the gospel of Matthew that whenever two or three persons gather in His name He will be in their midst" (CL 14,9). And Saint John Baptist de La Salle makes an immediate application to the community life of his Brothers, an application developed over a page that needs to be cited completely.

"He 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. He is in their midst to bring them together, accomplishing Himself what he asked for them from his Father before his death, by these words of St. John, chapter 17: May they be one in us, as you, Father, and I are one, that they may become perfectly one. That is to say, so one and so united, having only the same Spirit which is the Spirit of God that they may never become dis-united. Jesus Christ is in the midst of the Brothers in their exercises, in order to give them the spirit of their state, and in order to keep and strengthen them in the possession of that spirit, which is

for them the source and strengthening of their salvation, if they possess it always staunchly and without alteration. Jesus Christ is in the midst of the Brothers in order to teach them the truths and the maxims of the Gospel, in order to penetrate their hearts intimately with them, and to inspire them to make them the rule of their behaviour, to make them understand them, and to make them learn the way of putting these truths and maxims into practice which may be for them the most agreeable to God and the most conformable to their state. Jesus Christ is in the midst of the Brothers in order to commit them to making the practice of the same maxims of the Gospel, uniform in their society, in order that they may always maintain an entire and perfect union among them. Jesus Christ is in the midst of the Brothers in their exercises in order that with all of their actions tending towards Jesus Christ as to their centre they may be one in Him through the union which they will have with Jesus Christ acting in and through them. Jesus Christ is in the midst of the Brothers in their exercises in order to give them their completion and their perfection. For Jesus Christ is in relation to them like the sun which not only communicates to plants the power to produce, but also gives to their fruits the goodness and perfection which are more or less great in proportion to their greater or lesser exposure to the sun's rays. It is in this way that the Brothers perform their exercises and the actions in keeping with their state, with more or less perfection in proportion to their greater or lesser contact, conformity, and union with Jesus Christ. (CL 14,9)

What a truly Lasallian tableau of "this Church of Jesus Christ" (according to Saint Paul's expression) is our community (Med 169.3).

## 2. A discreet and welcoming [*engageant*] presence

Contemporary French dictionaries define the word *engageant* by the expression 'wishing to enter into relationship'. Could we not see here the most delightful quality of God which, paradoxically, is in best accord with the idea of discretion? For God makes no noise, does not impose himself, respects the free judgment of His creature at the very moment when He makes himself His closest companion, His most interior guest: "Truly you are a hidden God" (Isaias 45,15).

Confronted with this presence of God which completely pervades him but with a face never to be seen, how is man going to react? Taking this into account, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, having recourse to the psychological vocabulary of his time, sets out and names different attitudes of spirit and soul: view, attention, occupation, application and affection.

2.1. From an intellectual standpoint, **“view” is nothing more than a thought**. For the Christian, everything begins therefore by becoming aware that God, mysteriously is there, in him and around him, on condition at the same time, that this first gesture does not become enclosed in a strictly rational approach but is open to the light of faith: “After being convinced in spirit with the view of the presence of God, it is appropriate to make an act of faith on this truth that God is present to us” (CL 14,37). And the most excellent way of coming to this view of faith is by using Holy Scripture: “being the words of God, according to which makes us know them, they, by themselves help us to have God's view” (CL 14,45), and especially to keep ourselves “in a spirit of interior adoration by a simple view of faith in His holy presence, of His supreme greatness and infinite excellence” (CL 14,122).

We should note in passing that the word “view” also has a final sense when used “in view of”. For example, “They should act only in view of God” (Med 75,1); “it should only be with the sole view of pleasing God and of being pleasing to Him that you do your actions” (Med 75,3); “that your view should be to do the will of God” (L1,2); “I wish to have only you in view in all my actions” (CL 17,213); Distinguish well therefore “the view of God” from the object of our study here “the view of the presence of God”.

There still another prayer to crown this paragraph: “Give me the grace, O my God, that the view of your holy presence fills me always so that as I am always in your holy presence, there is not a single moment without thinking of you”.

2.2. **Attention presupposes a time for pausing and reflecting**. Interest is awakened and appeals both to the will and the intelligence in order that the spirit and the soul remain turned towards what constitutes their profound reason. God is now present to them. But this result is not maintained without a strong effort. First of all, it is an effort towards conversion: “It is necessary to have one's spirit and one's heart completely disengaged from what is

the ordinary attention and pleasure of human beings" (CL 17,278); it is especially also an effort of consistency: "It is necessary to do all one's actions with attention to God" (CL 20,489); The Collection offers the recipe: "What is it to pay attention to God in doing something? It is to think actually of God's presence" (CL 15, 43;Collection 81,4). The reader will have noted the force of "it is necessary" on which John Baptist de La Salle constructs these two sentences cited above, in order to emphasise the radical character in its double aspect of the spiritual effort to which it commits the Brothers. All the more reason therefore that he offers a final encouragement: "You need to ask God for the grace to walk always with Him, attentive to His holy presence" (CL 2, 1 271).

2.3. After 'view' and 'attention' come **occupation and application**, two terms relative to the same reality to the point where the Founder uses them equally, one for the other: "interior prayer is an interior occupation, that is to say an application of the soul to God" (CL 14,3). What is being discussed at this level is the meeting in the deepest part of the conscience of the faithful person seeking God and the God who wishes to be present to him. If it becomes absolutely essential to establish a fine point of difference between the two words used, it could be said that "application puts more emphasis on man's effort to adhere as closely as possible to the divine presence" whereas "occupation takes greater account of the impetus which pushes God to unveil Himself to the believer so as to penetrate his heart and occupy it". These are two convergent movements just like the answer that makes you return to the question, or the gift that fulfils the request.

But "that the spirit pass suddenly from its occupation with things perceived to things that are spiritual appears very difficult to very many" (CL 14,33). Saint John Baptist de La Salle in treating of the disposition of the soul for interior prayer, sheds light on the problem by providing the key: "Men's spirits being ordinarily applied during the greater part of the day to things that are exterior and perceptible, goes out in some way outside of themselves and is diminished, at least in a little way, from the quality of the things with which they are concerned. It is because of this that when you wish to apply yourself to interior prayer, you need to begin by withdrawing yourself from application to external and perceptible things and by applying yourself only to spiritual and interior mat-



ters and it is for this reason that you begin by applying yourself to the presence of God" (CL 14,4).

If the Founder is so insistent on this point, it is because of the natural incompatibility even to the point of opposition between the creature and the creator. Just as "you cannot serve God and Mammon" (Matt 6,24), in the same way "application to external things destroys in a soul concern for those things concerning God and His service" (Med 67,2), whereas "application to the presence of God withdraws the spirit from exterior things in order to occupy it only with those things which alone are within itself, and so to make it interior" (CL 14,5). These two citations among very many others, taken together, give an exact account of the deliberate act in which the soul invests itself. While application stretches its energy, excites its zeal and focuses its concerns, occupation opens it up completely and makes it receptive in its very depths. Finally, as a result of this, the spiritual quest leads beyond knowledge to a loving possession.

2.4. It is indeed this meaning that we would like to retain for the last of these psychological attitudes we have to study here, "**-affection**". This is the final link in the chain, which beginning from "view", the believer has to traverse to what his (De La Salle's) epoch called its "powers", that is to say, its capacities and strengths of spirit, of heart and of soul. It is the end-point of the effort required and which has been led by it. In affection, the act of faith is reached and is expanded, piety is nourished and devotion expressed. Once again, it is important to really understand the word that describes it, for this word has not ceased to evolve and to be enriched with multiple meanings in the period of transition between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the literary period of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

In its root, the word means "very strong attachment". You could therefore consider that the nature of affection consists in the firmness and determination and its principal effects in every form of fidelity and perseverance. Now the domain of attachment is a triple one since it can be exercised at the levels of will, judgment or heart.

**Attachment of the will.** In the writings of the Founder, in the 244 sentences where the word "affection" is found, more than two-

thirds are classified under this title. For example: "Prayer disposes us to unite ourselves intimately with God by conformity of affections so as to no longer wish nor desire anything except what refers to him" (CL 20,407); "this kind of interior prayer gently disposes the soul to the practice of virtue with the result that you conduct yourself with enthusiasm, overcoming courageously the difficulties and revulsions with which nature can meet, and embracing with affection the occasions for practising that present themselves" (CL 14, 100). [THE CONTINUITY OF MEANING BETWEEN 'ENTHUSIASM', 'COURAGE' AND 'AFFECTION' IS OBVIOUS AND ABOVE ALL, PROGRESSIVE]. "Those who hunger and thirst after justice are those who, seeing themselves a long way from the perfection that God demands of them, always animate themselves with the desire and affection which they have to arrive there" (CL 20, 191). [THE GOSPEL WORDS "HUNGER AND THIRST" CORRESPOND QUITE NATURALLY WITH THE WORDS 'DESIRE' AND 'AFFECTION']. "Maintaining the spirit and affections of the will is strictly speaking the body of interior prayer" (CL 15, 99 & Collection 193.3); "That my whole affection be to love you and to be pleasing to you in everything" (CL 17,80). Citations like this could be multiplied.

**Attachment of judgment.** The implications of the word 'affection' pass through the gamut of energy and decision to that of esteem, taste, inclination and, at the limit, to that of personal ideal. Judge this for yourself: "The teachers will inspire them with a great esteem and a particular affection for the offices of the Church" (CL 24,95); "That will give them an affection for school" (CL 24,184). [THERE IS NO QUESTION HERE OF SENTIMENTALITY!] "Throughout your whole life, you have to place all your affection in obeying" (Med 12,1); "The Brothers will make known to their Director their difficulties, temptations, affection (INCLINATION) or the ease they find in practising virtue" (CL 25,50 & Rule 12.8); "If there are any Latin books translated with the Latin on one side and ordinary language on the other, it will not be permitted for these to be read except by those who show no affection (or taste) for Latin" (CL 25,94 & Rule 26.3); "It is contrary to obedience to express some difficulty about what is commanded, to do it without any affection [TODAY WE WOULD SAY WITHOUT ANY CONVICTION], lazily or complaining or indicating some revulsion" (CL 15,31 & Collection 56.2); "May God put in their hearts a desire for their salvation" (Med 56.3).

**Attachment of the heart.** We come here into the domain of emotions, feelings and passions. The word “affection” here takes on its present day meaning, even if this is less frequent with Saint John Baptist de La Salle. We will meet it, in fact, only some eighteen times. Here are some examples: “The pupils have little affection for the teacher who is not welcoming [i.e. WHO DOES NOT WISH TO ENTER INTO RELATIONSHIP]” (CL 20,94); “Loving God with all one's heart, without any reservation and without giving place in one's heart to anything except God, who should possess it completely” (CL 20,94); “If we do not show any affection for those whom we love what will be our reward?” (CL 20,455); “Nothing apart from God deserves our affection” (Med 125.2); “The Brothers will have a cordial affection for one another” (CL 25.53 & Rule 13.1); “They will show equal affection for all their pupils” (CL 25.36 & Rule 7.14).

May the reader excuse this long list of citations, inevitably tedious as they are, but this is the only way, it seems to me, to take account of the great richness of the word as well as of its intrinsic ambiguity, and a source of difficulties both for reading and for translation.

What then should be retained relative to our concerns? It could be said that in the domain of the presence of God, researching 'affection' has its own rewards, a fullness of satisfaction that can only continually sharpen a continually born need, a desire never satisfied. This is what Saint John Baptist de La Salle witnesses to: “It happens for several souls who are free interiorly and free even from any created things, that God bestows on them the grace to rarely lose, or not to lose at all, the presence of God which is for them an anticipation and foretaste of the happiness of heaven” (CL 14,30). *Affection* here reminds us of a word we have already met in the paragraph on *attention*, a word that may astonish us coming from the Founder's pen, the word *pleasure* (CL 17,278).

### 3. An efficient presence

When God grants the grace of his presence to one of the faithful, it is not a dry gift closed in on itself. On the contrary, it has beneficial effects which increase its diffusion. For it, to be is to love, and to love is “that all men may have life and have it to the full” (John 10,10).

In the second chapter of the Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer, Saint John Baptist de La Salle puts forward six ways of putting oneself in the presence of God and indicates for each one, the “fruit” specific to it. Their mention in succession shows that, while indicating a daily journey of conversion, these fruits contribute in a very relevant way to the treasure and development of the Christian life.

3.1. Maintaining this sense of the divine presence has as its first effect to “prevent us from offending God when we are tempted or when we have the occasion to fall into sin, because, if we are ashamed to say some words or to do something displeasing to someone for whom we have some concern, how much more strongly should we fear to offend God in his presence, God who has been so full of love for us” (CL 14, 7,8).

Now if the initial step in conversion rightly consists in flight from sin, it brings with it as a consequence, “That we should not make use of the movement that God gives us — and which is in us continually and the actions which He does in us and with us and which we do by Him — to offend Him” (CL 14,14) but on the contrary “to take the needs of the body with the view of making God live in us, to live from his life and to live by him” (CL 14, 13). And this proper use of our body is extended to everything that our Heavenly Father has placed around us and put at our disposal for the expansion of our being in all its dimensions: natural elements or human companions.

In order to describe this practice, spiritual authors of the period used the expression “mistrust of creatures”. Such an expression can surprise, even shock us to the extent that, in our day, the theology of our relationship to the world (and therefore its spirituality) has evolved in a more positive manner. It is no longer a matter of seeing earthly realities as Satan’s Kingdom so as to flee from his pomps and his works. It consists simply in not attributing an absolute value to them as could happen by making an idol of oneself or by being proud of oneself, but to guard these gifts in their place as intermediate between God and us, while respecting their specific finality which is to contribute in their way to our supernatural vocation. This is what is said so neatly by Saint Paul when he asks Christians “to use this world so as not to be engrossed in them, for this world in its present form is passing away” (1 Cor 7,31).

3.2. Another effect is “to maintain ourselves easily in recollection and in attention to the presence of God, in movement or at rest wherever we are, even in the most distracting places” (CL 14,7).

This point has been touched on lightly in paragraph 23 and those that follow in reference to “the disposition of the soul for interior prayer” (CL 14,4), but we need to come back to it for its own sake because it takes on something of Bérullian, and consequently Lasallian spirituality, with a quite special importance.

Among other things, it is one aspect of the implacable antagonism that Scripture establishes between God and the “world” or the “flesh” and as a result of the radical choice that is proposed to the faithful. This is a choice that Saint John Baptist de La Salle explains and justifies: “Application to God being incompatible with application to external and perceptible things because God is spiritual, not being able even to agree with application to spiritual creatures because God is infinitely above created things, no matter how immaterial and perfect they may be” (CL 14,5). Therefore, in an encouraging way, he describes the results in advance: “The more a soul applies itself to God, the more it disengages itself from concern with creatures and consequently, of any attachment and affection for them. Thus it is that insensibly, the soul, filling itself with God detaches itself from creatures and becomes what is called interior by its separation and disengagement from perceptible and exterior things” (CL 14.5).

3.3. These latter texts allow us to evaluate the impact of the feeling of the presence of God and of its impact on the spiritual life itself. It is the initiation into the soul of the faithful person who is open and who facilitates its taking root there. It is also the nutrient that by its frequency and familiarity requires for its renewal only a moment of loving attention. It presents especially the incomparable advantage of **keeping it fixed on its natural centre which is God**. “You should not be concerned about anything except to make God reign in your heart by his grace and by the fullness of his love. It is for him that you should be living: it is the life of God himself that ought to be the life of your soul. You nourish the life of your soul with God's life by occupying yourself with His holy presence as much as you are able” (Med 67,1).

There lies the resolution of the conflict foreseen in the preceding paragraphs. It is the Creator alone who gives their meaning to his

creatures: it is in Him alone that these things should be considered, it is only from His viewpoint that they should be appreciated. "We should make apparent in our conduct that really we live from God's life, that we should have only thoughts that fill us with God and with lowly sentiments for all worldly things that are external to us. If we are to place any value on them it must be only that they are in God, convinced as we should be that all things are as nothing to us except for the fact that God is in them and they are imbued with God" (CL 14,13).

The Christian should have as a slogan not "since I have encountered the face of God I can no longer support that of men" but rather "since I have encountered the face of God, I find it at every moment in that of my brothers". Saint John Baptist de La Salle draws the pastoral conclusion: "You are under the obligation to instruct the children of the poor. You should, consequently, cultivate a very special tenderness for them and procure their spiritual welfare as far as you will be able, considering them as members of Jesus Christ and His well-beloved. Faith, which should animate you, should make you honour Jesus Christ in their persons, and make you prefer them to the wealthiest children on earth because they are the living images of Jesus Christ, our divine Master". (Med 80.3)

3.4. This flowering of the sense of the presence of God in itself and of His presence in the other person develops the interior life of the faithful and bestows on it its true stamp of a life of union with God. At the same time, it leads a person along the path that leads to the highest degree of the Christian life, sanctity, especially that which should be our own: "What characterizes the life of the saints is their continual attention to God. This should also be true of souls consecrated to God, who seek only to do His holy will, to love Him, and cause him to be loved by others. This should be your entire preoccupation on earth; to accomplish this should be the goal of all your work" (Med 67.1).

## Part two: The exercise of the presence of God

On 8<sup>th</sup> July 1708, Saint John Baptist de La Salle wrote to Brother Denis, Director of Darnetal, "it is a very useful practice to apply oneself to the presence of God; be faithful to it" (Letter 11.8). It is impossible in reading this sentence not to notice the deep conviction that comes from it. Thirty-eight years since his entry into the Saint Sulpice Seminary, it passes onto us much more than the teaching he had himself received there as rather a sincere and strong witness to his personal experience. What is shown there in complete harmony is the doctor of theology, the director of consciences and above all the seeker after God which he was in the very depths of his soul for his whole life.

It seems to us, therefore, perfectly logical that strong in the mystical current of his age he offered both for his Brothers and for the children in his schools, a practice that he knew to be so fruitful.

### 1. Religious aspect of the exercise of the presence of God

"They 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" (CL 25,19). Such is the prescription given to the Brothers by article 7 of the second chapter of the Rule, entitled "The Spirit of this Institute."

1.1. We need to see, in fact, that the practice of the presence of God is not reduced by Saint John Baptist de La Salle to a more or less marginal devotion left to the imagination of the individual, something simply added as an act of piety like the cherry on a cake, a little something extra from folklore. He inserts it at the very heart of what is the original spirituality, a birth mark, the foundation of their religious personality and a criterion of their identity within the Church: the spirit of faith.

Throughout all the fifteen or so Rules of religious teaching congregations, male or female, that I have been able to read, I have noticed that their authors are at one in giving charity as the basis of their charism. Saint John Baptist de La Salle goes well beyond that, and is the only one to my knowledge, who has based his Institute on the very principle of Christian life: faith. And this is not any kind of faith, but that which, according to Saint James "is made perfect by works" (James 2,22), that which according to the present Rule itself "kindles in the Brothers an ardent zeal for those confided to their care" (Rule art.7).

In the text cited above (Collection 2.7, CL 25.19) the Founder himself clarifies his intention by beginning "being persuaded that", a formula he makes use of each time he wishes to gain from the person with whom he is talking an intrinsic support which commits him completely. Then he continues, "they should think only of him and what he commands, that is to say, what concerns their duty and employment". The expression "only" is a radical one: it is commanding [the word 'should' invokes a moral obligation referring to 'state' in its most general sense i.e. profession and social status]; it is concrete [the word 'employment' designates the ministry proper to the Brothers which they carry out in the heart of the Church in and by the Christian school].

The question posed, then, is the following: what is the relationship between the spirit of faith and the exercise of the presence of God? To answer this, we will again turn to the Founder. In a letter of which Blain cites only a passage (CL 8.232), he explains: "The spirit of faith is a participation of the spirit of God residing in us which ensures that we are governed by the sentiments and maxims that faith teaches us" (Letter 105).

This phrase offers us an example characteristic of the spirit of synthesis of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. Completely centred on the Holy Spirit, it affirms first of all quite categorically the presence in our soul and then, in its final part, makes clear the action in the field of the development of our Christian life. This is a traditional doctrine in the Church and we find it in the meditation for the Monday in the octave of Pentecost: "The truths which the Holy Spirit teaches to those who receive him are the maxims found in the holy Gospel. He helps them to understand these maxims and to take them to heart, and he leads them to live and act in accor-



dance with them. For the Spirit of God alone can give us a correct understanding of these maxims of the Gospel and can inspire us to put them into practice, because they are above the level of the human spirit" (Med 44.2). What God present to us communicates by his Spirit cannot be of any other nature than what is communicated to us by his Son: "The Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name will teach you all things and bring to your minds what I have told you" (John 14,26).

Recalling the presence of God, therefore, is to make an act of faith and, in this very act, nourish oneself in faith.

But the Founder, whose first concern with regard to his Brothers is to make very effort to guarantee the spiritual formation he considers indispensable both for their religious life as well as for their apostolate, would not be satisfied with simply formulating general principles in his Rule, excellent though they may be. He availed himself of all the suitable moments, notably interviews but especially the monthly correspondence he maintained with them, in order to bring them in simple and concrete language all the desirable clarifications about this spirit of faith about which he said that "those who do not have it or have lost it should be regarded, and should regard themselves, as dead members, since they are deprived of the life and of the grace of their state" (CL 15.44 & Collection 93,94).

This is precious teaching and he includes it in the Collection of which the oldest edition dates from 1705. There we can find the question: "What are the most appropriate means given to us to help us have the spirit of faith and to lead us by that spirit?" He replies that there are seven, and after some aspects taken from the Rule such as "having a profound respect for holy Scripture... animating all our actions with sentiments of faith... having nothing in view in everything but the commands and the will of God..." he adds that "the sixth is to have as much attention as possible to the presence of God and to renew it from time to time" (CL 15,44 & R 82,83).

Some pages later he comes back to this and makes this doctrine more explicit: "*How does attention to the holy presence of God serve to regulate our actions by the spirit of faith?* First, it makes us perform them through respect for God. Second, it causes us to act modestly and with recollection on account of the holy pres-

ence. Third, it preserves us from sin as being displeasing and offensive in God's sight." (*Collection of Various Short Treatises*, Christian Brothers Conference, Landover, MD 20785, 1993, p. 38).

1.2. Being part of the spirit of faith, the exercise of the presence of God subsequently plays a key role in the interior life of a Lasallian. Sometimes the most explicit and most evocative title given to this is "life of union with God", an expression which fully justifies the importance which the presence of God holds. To live in union with someone, should it not be no matter who the person is, that the person is in some manner or other, present? And since God never ceases to be in us and around us, it is for our piety to make the effort to awaken us in faith to his presence.

Thus it is that the Collection explains that it is necessary to pay "attention to the holy presence of God, 1) because it is a means for driving bad or useless thoughts out of our minds or preventing them having any impression; 2) because the presence of God is the soul and support of the interior life; 3) because spiritual exercises have much more strength when they are animated by the presence of God" (CL 15.62 Collection 119,10,22).

Doubtless, the first of the above reasons may appear to be very negative. But it does not in any way take away from the very realistic thought of Saint John Baptist de La Salle as this text, already cited, shows: "For the spirit to pass suddenly from being occupied with tangible things to things that are purely spiritual would appear to be very difficult for many and quite impossible for others" (CL 14.33). A determined effort to free and purify it becomes indispensable to give openness and existence to the evocation of spiritual realities in the two other instances and this fully justifies the first reason.

Among other concrete arrangements taken by the Founder to regulate the daily life of the Brother, there are two that indicate his continual concern to encourage and help the growth of their interior life. We find this in the long list of topics that can be treated during recreation. "Of the great good that the exercise of the presence of God obtains and the means to make it easy and frequent" (CL 15.36 & Collection 66.4.7). And in the "articles on which they need to examine their conscience", he encourages them to go farther: "Whether or not one pays attention to the holy presence of God, frequent or even continuous" (CL 15.20 & Collection 34.20).

In the "Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer" he indeed slips in this statement which sounds somewhat like a personal secret: "It happens that some souls are so interiorly freed and even removed from any affection for created things that God gives them the grace that they rarely or never lose the sense of the presence of God, which is for them an anticipation and foretaste of the happiness of heaven", (CL 14.30,31). The expressions "interior life" and "spiritual life" are perfectly synonymous. He employs the first expression 211 times and the second 218. Sometimes he unites the two expressions to emphasise his thought: "A person lives a new life, that is to say an interior and spiritual life..." (Med 31.1) but this is very rare.

1.3. All religions prescribe specific acts that assure, mark out and nourish for their faithful their life of union with God: reading sacred texts, common or private prayers, sharing in offerings and cultural sacrifices. We find these certainly in the daily life of each Brother.

From its origin, the monastic life in the East as in the West, imposed on its members a form of reading that tradition calls spiritual doubtless because of the religious character of the works used, but even more because it was intended to develop not so much the knowledge of the reader as his love of God. Hence the advice of the Founder: "Never begin any reading without first putting yourself in the presence of God, asking Him by a short prayer for the graces and the enlightenment to be able to understand and put into practice what you are going to read" (CL 15.74 & Collection 143.15), and "read your book as though you were reading a letter that Jesus Christ would have sent you for you to know His holy will" (CL 15.75 & Collection R.144.10).

Understood in this way, spiritual reading is a direct preparation for interior prayer, the most excellent exercise of the interior life. Saint John Baptist de La Salle consecrated a complete treatise from which a great number of texts have been used to illustrate this study. It would be tiresome to repeat all this. Let us content ourselves with this suggestion: "The first thing one should do in interior prayer is to penetrate oneself interiorly with the presence of God, something which should always be done by a sentiment of faith founded on a passage drawn from Sacred Scripture" (CL 14.6), or this comment, "this should not be done for a short time

because it contributes greatly to obtaining the spirit of interior prayer and the interior application one can have" (CL 14.35).

To this advice, Saint John Baptist de La Salle knows how to add some encouragement: "if you love God, interior prayer will be the food of your soul and He will enter within you and will have you eat at His table, as Saint John says in the Apocalypse, and you will then have as well the advantage of having Him present during all your actions and having no other purpose than to please Him; you will even always hunger for it, as the Wise man says, for, according to the expression of the Prophet-King, you will never be satisfied until you enjoy His glory in heaven" (Med 177.3).

In 1702 before the Explanation, he had printed a work of some 280 pages entitled "Instructions and prayers for Holy Mass, Confession and Communion". It was intended especially for children, perhaps also with an unexpressed intention of contacting parents through the children. In it, he summarised the proposals offered to the Brothers in the Collection, where we find this advice: "Often renew thinking of the presence of God and the respect that the angels have before His divine Majesty" (CL 15.77 & Collection 133.4).

Indeed, these directions had reference to the whole day, to all the activities of the Brothers as well as to their work: "They will go down on their knees to adore God present whenever they enter and leave every place in the house except the courtyard and the garden in which it be enough for them to take off their hats and salute the crucifix" (CL 25.25 & Rule IV.13). This extended also to leisure time: "Take some recreation every day after meals. Do not do this too enthusiastically or effusively but be careful not to become dissipated and lose the sense of the presence of God" (CL 15.77 & Collection 149.6).

In the present Rule, re-written in 1986, nothing more is said except the closing phrase of the second chapter: "The entire life of the Brothers is transformed by the presence of the Lord who calls, consecrates, sends and saves". This sentence was never written by Saint John Baptist de La Salle but it is completely his thought.

## 2. The pastoral aspect of the presence of God

The education wished for by Saint John Baptist de La Salle for the pupils in his schools had as its purpose to make them “true Christians” (Med 171.3), “true disciples of Jesus Christ” (Med 116.2), “true children of God and citizens of heaven” (Med 199.3), by giving them “the true spirit of Christianity” (Med 159.1). His whole pedagogy is developed in this direction whether you look at “The Conduct of Schools” or “the Exercises of Piety to be carried out during the day in the Christian schools”.

Unlike other words used during his time, De La Salle describes the two sections of the school day by “morning” and “evening”.

2.1. Numerous prayers actually link the day because they open and conclude each particular activity. There is a mixture of formulas in Latin and French.

The more developed ones said “at the beginning of the school day at 8.00 a.m. (CL 18.3) and afternoon at 1.30” (CL 18.21) begin by the sign of the Cross and the reminder “Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God” and the invocation of the Holy Spirit. They include next one of the seven acts of faith “which are said each day of the week”, on Sunday “on all the Church believes and requires me to believe”, “on Monday on the mystery of the Holy Trinity, Tuesday on the immortality of the soul, Wednesday on the Mystery of the Incarnation, Thursday on the Holy Eucharist, Friday on the Redemption and Saturday on the Resurrection” (CL 18.19.21).

During class from 8.30 to 10.30 in the morning and 1.30 to 3.30 in the afternoon, there is an act of offering and petition, “My God, I am going to carry out this lesson for love of you: give me, please, your holy blessing” (CL 18.6); “My God, I am going to carry out this action for love of you. Allow me to offer it to you in honour of and in union with actions of Jesus Christ carried out during his time on earth and give me the grace to do it so well that it may be pleasing to you” (CL 18.22); “I will continue, O my God, to do all my actions for love of you. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (CL 18.6). This formula was repeated by the pupil at every change of activity.

The “Prayers said at the conclusion of school for the morning” are integrated with a point for reflection briefly commented on by the

teacher in order to suggest good resolutions to the pupils. There were five of them, one for each day: "1) we should consider that this day has been given to us only for us to work towards our salvation"; 2) "we should note that this day will be perhaps the last one of our life"; 3) "we should make a strong resolution to make use of this whole day to serve God in view of gaining life eternal"; 4) "we should be prepared to die rather than offend God"; 5) we should think of the faults we most ordinarily commit, foreseeing the occasions that make us fall and seeking the means to avoid them" (CL 18.9).

The "prayers said at the end of the school day include a very detailed examination of conscience. There were four such, of which one was taken every day during a whole week": each pupil was to examine His conscience individually (CL 18.30,33).

The 'breakfast' preceding the morning class (CL 18.4) and the 'snack' that followed in the afternoon (CL 18.23) were taken between a blessing and a thanksgiving.

The end of the 'snack' preceded the catechism, the very climax of the day. It began usually at 4.00pm (CL 18.24) by the singing of a canticle. A small work separate from the "Exercises of piety" gathered some 70 canticles for different periods and liturgical seasons to which there were added an "invitation to catechism" and the other "to implore the assistance of the Holy Spirit before the catechism" with couplets reserved for each day of the week (CL 18,134). At the end of the catechism, there was an act said at the end of the school day: "My God, I thank you for all the instructions you have given me today during school; give me the grace to profit from them and to be faithful in putting them into practice" (CL 18.25).

In all these acts of devotion, the body took an active part. The pupils were required to maintain the prescribed posture: "At the first sound of the bell, all the pupils will kneel down, their arms crossed and their eyes lowered in a very modest external posture" (CL 24.6). The teacher was to be very vigilant about this: "The teacher will be careful they do not move or change their posture, that they do not lean on the arms either in front or behind, do not touch them nor sit back on their heels; they are not to turn their heads to look about them and especially that they do not touch one another" (CL 24.81). All the more so, "the teacher during the

prayers will do as on all other occasions, what he wishes the pupils to do. He will always remain standing in front of his chair with a very serious expression, very reserved and recollected, his arms crossed and with great modesty, so as to give to the pupils an example of what they should be doing during this time" (CL 24.81).

It is not only at the entrance and exit that they follow a ritual: "The teachers will be vigilant that all the pupils in entering the school walk so lightly and so carefully that they cannot be heard, that they have their hat in hand, take holy water and make the sign of the cross. They will be encouraged to enter class in a profound respect for the presence of God. Having reached the centre, they will make a deep bow to the crucifix, salute the teacher and will go carefully without any noise to their place" (CL 24.2,3).

It can be noted that even care of clothing is not without importance, in view of the principle proposed by Saint John Baptist de La Salle in the "Rules of Decorum": "Carelessness about clothing shows that not enough attention is being paid to the presence of God or that someone does not have enough respect for him" (CL 19.61).

2.2. These few examples have enabled us come close to seeing how "the behaviour of the teachers from morning to night" (CL 25.16 & Rule ch.1. art.3) brought about an intimate and natural union between the human and the Christian in the formation of pupils. These last texts cited bring us back now to our particular topic: the presence of God.

The prayers we have just reviewed briefly take their place at the beginning and the end of various activities and have as their aim to have the children praying on the occasion of these activities. Saint John Baptist de La Salle inserted others of a very different nature throughout the day. Here is how he presents them: "At each hour of the day, there will be several short prayers which will help the teachers to renew their attention to themselves, to the presence of God and to the pupils, to get them used to thinking of God from time to time during the day and to dispose them to offer him all their actions to draw down blessings on themselves" (CL 24.76).

The "Exercises of Piety" make clear the times and the prayers: for the morning "at nine and at ten o'clock" (CL 18.6). They also

indicate the content: "In the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God. Blessed be the day and the hour of the birth, death and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. My God, I give you my heart, give me the grace to pass this hour and the rest of the day in your holy love and without offending you". There follow the Hail Mary and the act of faith foreseen for that day (CL 18.6).

Moreover, the Conduct of Schools, having described the behaviour the pupils were to maintain during the prayers of the day (see above CL 24.81) adds: "During the other prayers said at different times in the school, the teacher and the pupils will remain at their places, their arms crossed, with an external modesty just as they have during the morning and evening prayers" (CL 24.82).

These recallings of the presence of God do not really mark the passage from one activity to the other. They only briefly suspend the lesson in progress which, after a time for breathing spiritually, continues at once. It is therefore more suitable and practical for the pupils to remain in their working positions.

But the truly original aspect of these "other prayers" consists in the fact that they not only concern the pupils but also, and first of all, the teachers. They offer them in the very midst of their work the opportunity to refresh themselves in what the Founder calls "the spirit of our state", this situation so unusual at the period that called on lay people living in community to work in the Church in the field of the school. In this "society" where an employment is raised to the level of a ministry, the teacher is transformed into an apostle and pedagogy is transcended into a pastoral work. How then could it not be felt that there was a fundamental need to have continual recourse to a God who allows himself to be reached in a love always present.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle, throughout his life, never ceased recommending to his Brothers "the exercise of the presence of God. There is nothing you should, or could, procure with more care, because it is happiness anticipated in this life, and it is also of great use to you in your work, because this work concerns God and aims at winning souls for him. It is, therefore, a matter of great consequence [i.e. IMPORTANCE] not to lose sight of God in your work. Make yourself as faithful to this as you possibly can. (Med 179.3). He takes up this idea frequently in his correspondence



with his Brothers: "The presence of God will be very useful for you in helping you and animating you to do all your actions well" (Letter 102.7). "Often recollect yourself to renew and strengthen in yourself the memory of the presence of God. The more you try to do this, the more facility you will have in doing your actions well and in carrying out your duties successfully" (Letter 1.5).

Moreover, with very simple words reduced to their meaning, he maintains the same language with the pupils, inciting them to live as best they can under the benevolent gaze of God, so as not to carry out any of their actions except for Him and with the help of His grace.

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