



PASTORAL LETTER

“REPRESENTING JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF”

IDENTITY AND PRAYER

Brother John Johnston, FSC
Superior General

1 January 1990

“Representing Jesus Christ Himself”

Identity and Prayer

“Since you are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ in the work that you do, you must act as representing Jesus Christ himself. He wants your disciples to see him in you and receive your teaching as if he were teaching them...

“In order to fulfill your responsibility with as much perfection and care as God requires of you, frequently give yourself to the Spirit of our Lord to act only under his influence and not through any self-seeking. This Holy Spirit, then, will fill your students with Himself, and they will be able to possess fully the Christian spirit.”

Meditations for Time of Retreat 3.2

1 January 1990

World Day of Peace

Dear Brothers,

“To you all, God’s beloved... called to be saints, may God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ send grace and peace” (Romans 1:7).

Paul’s words to the Christians of Rome express beautifully the sentiments in my mind and heart as I begin this letter. We are all “God’s beloved”. Not only has he gifted us with life and sustained us in his loving care, he has chosen us and called us to be Brothers of the Christian Schools. Furthermore, we are all “called to be saints”, as the beatification of Brother Scubilion and the canonization of Brother Mutien-Marie have cogently reminded us.

Brothers, I thank you sincerely for your greetings during the Christmas season and for your earnest prayers that God bestow upon our Institute, upon the entire Lasallian Family, and upon those of us called to serve in the Central Government, an abundance of the gifts of His Spirit.

My own prayer for “you all, God’s beloved... called to be saints,” is that God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ grant you through his Spirit the grace and peace which you — and each of us — need so urgently.

The Events of 1989... and our Brothers

During their end-of-the-year reports throughout the past week, television as well as print journalists have sought, with varying degrees of success, to summarize and interpret the remarkable events of this past year. Pope John Paul II said in his Christmas Day message that Europe had been delivered from a nightmare. Some commentators have said that years such as 1989 happen only once or twice each century.

But I leave such considerations to historians and political analysts. My purpose is simply to call to mind that as God in His Providence has charged us with serving youth in approximately half the countries that constitute the United Nations, the events of 1989 have directly or indirectly touched the lives of hundreds of our Brothers.

The totally unexpected changes in Poland, for example, as well as in Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Hungary, three countries in which the Institute was suppressed, will certainly have a profound impact on the lives of our Brothers. Because at the time I am writing these words, situations are still far from settled, particularly in Romania, it is premature to say more at this time.

We rejoice, however, with our faith-filled and heroic Brothers, men who have lived their religious consecration with extraordinary fidelity in the midst of the "nightmare" of religious persecution that has prevailed. Despite formidable difficulties of communication, they have maintained unity and solidarity with the Institute. Brothers, we are proud of you

and we thank you for demonstrating what our fifth vow, the vow of stability, should mean for all of us.

I am thinking also of those of you who live and serve in those areas of the world which suffered extraordinary violence during this past year: Lebanon (where our veteran Brother Paul Ruffié was a fatal victim), the Occupied West Bank, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Panama, Colombia, Peru... Brothers of Vietnam and Burma, I am thinking of you and am praying that prevailing obstacles to our pastoral visits will soon be removed.

But on the positive side, 1989 is the year in which the Brothers returned to Cuba. We thank God for this great gift. It is a pleasure for me to greet the three Brothers of the first of what we hope will soon be several communities.

Blessed Scubilion... Saint Mutien-Marie

But 1989 was an extraordinary year for another reason: it was the year in which God "spoke" to the Institute and to the entire Church through two exceptional events: the beatification of Brother Scubilion on 2 May and the canonization of Brother Mutien-Marie on 10 December.

As I have reflected on the lives of these two extraordinary Brothers, I have found myself focusing not so much on the strikingly different way in which the two men lived their Lasallian vocation, but more on what they had in common; more on the "substance" expressed and revealed in their disparate personal histories.

Both were truly men of God, “representing Jesus Christ Himself” to those confided to their care. Both Brother Scubilion and Brother Mutien gave themselves completely and unreservedly to God. God poured the gifts of his Spirit upon them in such abundance that they were able to touch hearts as ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ.

I thought of Brothers Scubilion and Mutien, as well as of our other holy Brothers, when I read, several months ago, Mother Teresa’s beautiful prayer entitled “Radiating Christ”:

“Dear Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go... Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that my life may radiate your life. Shine through me to such a degree that every person I contact may feel your presence... Let each one look up and see no longer me but only Jesus.”

It is not easy to pray those words and really mean them. The implications are staggering and disturbing. To radiate Christ to others, I have to “let go” and abandon myself completely to God, permitting him to act through me. That thought is rather threatening. But our Founder, St. John Baptist de La Salle is uncompromising in his insistence that we are indeed called to radiate Christ as his ministers and ambassadors.

Communication through Images

As we strive today to understand more profoundly who it is God wants us to be and what it is

he wants us to do, and as we struggle to change whatever we must change to live our vocation more authentically, we can benefit immensely from meditation on the images De La Salle used to help the early Brothers grasp the significance of their calling:

“Images speak to us existentially... they communicate through their evocative power. They convey a latent meaning that is apprehended in a nonconceptual, even a subliminal way — apprehended not simply by the mind but by the imagination, the heart, the whole person” (Avery Dulles).

To explore some of the images employed by De La Salle and to reflect upon their implications for us today is the purpose of this pastoral letter.

PART I: “LOOKING UPON YOURSELVES AS...”

In the first of the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, our Founder exhorts the Brother retreatants to proclaim the “truth to those whom you are called to teach... looking upon yourselves as the ministers of God and the administrators of his mysteries” (MTR 1.1). It is instructive to examine the Pauline text which inspired these words: I Corinthians 4:1. Paul says that “people must think of us” as “the ministers of God and the administrators of his mysteries”.

Following the lead of Paul, but with striking originality and creativity, De La Salle employs vivid images, images which, according to Dulles, speak

existentially, communicate through their evocative power, are apprehended not simply by the mind but by the imagination, the heart, the whole person.

De La Salle, of course, uses many images: in addition to *ministry* and *minister*, we find *steward*, *cooperator with Jesus Christ*, *ambassador*, *branch attached to the vine*, *instrument*, *Good Shepherd*, *guardian angel*, *architect*... A number of these images are, of course, inspired by Paul, a fact of great importance in grasping the Founder's understanding of the Brother's vocation:

"Without comparing yourself to this great saint... you can say that you are doing the same thing he did, that you are fulfilling the same ministry in your profession" (MTR 7.1).

From Images to Models

Dulles asserts that an image conveys a latent meaning that is apprehended in a nonconceptual, even a subliminal way. But, he says, "When an image is employed reflectively and critically to deepen one's theoretical understanding of a reality, it becomes a model" (Dulles).

My purpose is to reflect upon the images De La Salle employs in order to comprehend more profoundly his MODEL of the Brothers' vocation, that is to say, his theoretical understanding of that reality. "Model" can be more precisely defined as a "basic pattern or design within which and against which, every subordinate part or element assumes its meaning and importance" (Richard O'Brien).

The title of this letter is taken from the quotation I have chosen as the fundamental point of departure:

"Since you are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ in the work that you do, you must act as representing Jesus Christ himself" (MTR 3.2).

It is true that De La Salle does not employ the image of "one who represents Christ" as explicitly or as frequently as other images. Nevertheless, I am focusing attention upon this passage and the image that is implied because the Founder leaves no doubt that he is perfectly serious when he tells the Brothers that they are to represent Christ:

"Christ wants your disciples to see him in you and receive your teaching as if he were teaching them. They must be convinced that the truth of Jesus Christ comes from your mouth" (MTR 3.2).

God in His Providence...

To understand how the Founder arrived at these images which help us to grasp his vision of the Brothers' call, let us return to that meditation which I believe has very special significance because of its content and because of its rank as the first meditation.

Since the time of retreat was surely as precious a period in the life of the early Brothers as it is for us today, it seems reasonable to suppose that the material De La Salle prepared for the use of the

Brothers had particular importance. Furthermore, since retreat directors normally give special attention to their first conference, it makes sense to observe very closely the content of that opening meditation.

De La Salle loses no time in inviting the Brothers to reflect on the meaning of their vocation in the light of God's salvific plan. It is God in his Providence, that is to say, in his loving concern for those he has created, who takes the initiative. God wants all persons — specifically the poor and abandoned youngsters who frequented the schools of the Brothers — to come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved. But because God works through human ministers, the children need someone to announce the Word to them.

For this purpose God kindles a light in the hearts of certain persons, those he has destined to announce his Word. Brothers, the Founder said, "Since God has given you such a ministry," proclaim His truth without reticence or compromise, "looking upon yourselves as the ministers of God and the administrators of His mysteries."

De La Salle's "model", that is to say, his theoretical understanding of the Brothers' vocation, is inspired by his profound knowledge of the vocations of numerous men and women in the Scriptures, men and women called by God in response to concrete needs, men and women invited but not forced to say YES. The Founder's images — *ministers*, *Good Shepherds*, *Guardian Angels* — all helped the early Brothers to grasp the nature of their calling. It is God who has taken the initiative in cal-

ling them. In his loving concern for children, particularly poor children, God confides children to the care of the Brothers and, through the Holy Spirit, provides them with the enlightenment, the grace, and the power they require.

I Consecrate Myself Entirely...

This understanding of the Brothers' vocation is evident in their *Formula of Vows*: in consecrating themselves entirely to God according to this formula, the Brothers revealed their belief that God had called them to give themselves entirely to Him and to live that consecration in the exercise of their apostolic ministry of education. Their commitment to this "society" was serious and demanding. They vowed obedience and expressed explicitly their readiness to go wherever they were sent and to do whatever they were assigned. Finally they made a vow of stability, committing themselves to persevere, whatever the costs.

The Brothers' vocation — serving as Christ's ministers and ambassadors, representing Jesus Christ to the young — demands that the Brothers be men of God, men of faith, men of prayer, men of zeal, men of community. But how can this vocation, which De La Salle considered so exalted and so necessary, be authentically realized? The Founder's answer is clear:

"In order to fulfill your responsibility with as much perfection and care as God requires of you, frequently give yourself to the Spirit of our Lord to act only under his influence and

not through any self-seeking. This Holy Spirit, then will fill your students with Himself, and they will be able to possess fully the Christian spirit" (MTR 3.2).

I repeat that by "model" I mean the "basic pattern or design within which and against which every subordinate part or element assumes its meaning and importance" (O'Brien). An analysis of the meditations of De La Salle reveals the consistency of his thought concerning the vocation of the Brother. For an excellent example we need only examine the meditation for the feast of St. Stephen, martyr:

"It is your happiness to have been chosen by God to make known Jesus Christ and to announce his coming... remember that you must be true to your faith, grounded in it, firmly established in it. Strive then... to make known Jesus Christ to those whom you instruct... It is for this end that God has called you to your present vocation" (Med. 87).

It is the Brother who is true to his faith, grounded in it, firmly established in it, that is able "to represent Jesus Christ himself" to those God confides to his care.

De La Salle and Vatican II

How interesting it is — and encouraging — to reflect on De La Salle's conception of the Brothers' vocation in the light of Vatican II, particularly in the light of this magnificent and extremely important

passage on consecrated life, taken from *Lumen Gentium*:

"Let religious see well to it that the Church truly show forth Christ through them with ever-increasing clarity to believers and non-believers alike — Christ in contemplation on the mountain, or proclaiming the kingdom of God to the multitudes, or healing the sick and maimed and converting sinners to a good life, or blessing children and doing good to all men..." (L.G. 46).

Our manner of radiating Christ is made explicit by John Paul II in these words addressed to the Congregation of Christian Brothers, but applying as well to us:

"The Church is grateful for your labors on behalf of the gospel, and for everything you do to make Jesus the Teacher present in the world today. Remember always that the measure of your effectiveness depends on how totally you 'put on Christ', how totally you accept his word into your hearts, how totally you remain in his love."

Our vocation then, Brothers, according to our Founder and according to Vatican II, is to make the loving and saving presence of Christ a visible and effective reality in the world of education and among the young. The word "visible" is important. The distinctive character of vocation to consecrated religious life

"... is not the vocation to holiness (common to all Christians), but the public profession... of the will to live fully and radically the Gospel...

It is a public commitment to follow Jesus Christ, which is not to repeat and imitate what he did, but rather... to reincarnate his presence in the world... God, in Jesus Christ, must be made manifest through us so that humanity may understand that God *is* and that only God truly *is*... religious evangelize first and foremost by *being* what they are, whatever may be their way of life and action... religious as such will evangelize to the degree that, through their lives and their being, they again make present in the world, faithfully and radically, Jesus Christ himself." (Marcello Azevedo, *Vocation for Mission*, pp. 8, 14. 138)

Integration of Constitutive Dimensions

An analysis of the images used by De La Salle reveals clearly that "John Baptist de La Salle was led to found a community of men who were enlightened by God to have a share in his plan of salvation. They associated together to respond to the needs of young people who were poor and far from salvation" (*Rule*, 47).

He founded this community of men to respond to what he perceived as a critical need. There was certainly never any intention on his part to found a religious community to which would be assigned some useful apostolic activity.

His model or theoretical understanding of the Brothers' vocation never admitted a dichotomy between religious consecration and ministry. The

model introduced some years later and based on a distinction between principal end and secondary end, or generic end and specific end, was foreign to his manner of thinking. Never did he tell the Brothers that they were religious *primarily* and ministers, ambassadors, Good Shepherds, or "representatives of Christ" *secondarily*. For him the image said it all. For De La Salle the Brothers glorified God by living together and by association their total consecration to the Holy Trinity as ministers of Christian education.

A Clear Dichotomy...

Unfortunately, however, with the prominence awarded to a certain interpretation of the formula of primary end/secondary end, we lost sight of De La Salle's model. There developed among us a clear dichotomy between the "religious" and "apostolic" dimensions of our life.

While I acknowledge that I risk oversimplifying or even caricaturing, I think that it is accurate to say that all too often the tendency was to identify the "primary end" with "religious life" understood essentially in terms of prayer, silence, regular observance, fidelity to the vows; and to identify the "secondary end" with apostolic activities.

The priority in both initial and continuing formation of the Brothers was accorded the "primary" end. While professional formation for exercise of the apostolate was provided, the relation of ministry to religious consecration was not given adequate attention. The model operating in fact —

a model which developed from consideration of the Brothers as “religious” on the one hand and “teachers” on the other — is not at all the model that emerges from serious reflection on the images used by De La Salle. I believe that this inadequate “model” has had and, to an extent, still has consequences that are significantly negative.

1. My impression is that for many of us our professional and apostolic activity is on the margin of our religious life. It is not sufficiently associated with our consecration. Our apostolic activity not only does not nourish sufficiently our religious life, it is even at times an obstacle to our growth as religious persons.

2. Because commitment to the apostolate has not been presented with sufficient clarity as an integral part of the consecration of the Brother to God (*Rule*, 87), and “ardent zeal” not always insisted upon as an essential dimension of the spirit of the Institute, many of us have not been the evangelizers we should be. We have been highly successful school men, but sometimes too easily satisfied with providing quality education and not sufficiently concerned with being ministers of the young and with making the schools centers of effective religious instruction and pastoral service — as well as centers of academic or technical excellence.

Vatican II and Apostolic Religious Life

Vatican II took a new and very satisfying approach to apostolic religious life, providing orientations which have, in effect, replaced the primary

end/secondary end formula. Speaking of apostolic institutes, *Perfectae Caritatis* asserts that

“...apostolic charitable activity is of the very nature of religious life... for this reason, the entire religious life of the members should be imbued with an apostolic spirit, and all their apostolic activity with a religious spirit” (P.C. 8).

This passage strongly supported efforts in the 39th General Chapter to clarify the identity of the Brother and to restore to the Institute the apostolic spirituality of the Founder. The result of those efforts is expressed, of course, in the extraordinary document *A Declaration: The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today*, which vigorously and effectively makes its own the model of apostolic religious life originally proposed by John Baptist de La Salle.

In continuity with that orientation, our new *Rule* insists that each Brother take upon himself “the responsibility for integrating within his own person these constitutive dimensions of his vocation: consecration to God as a lay religious, apostolic ministry of education, especially of the poor, and community life” (*Rule*, 10).

Integration, not Juxtaposition

I think, however, that there is still some confusion in understanding the meaning of “integration”. As much as I would like to think that the problem of “dichotomy” or even “trichotomy” is behind us, my experience indicates to me that such is not the rea-

lity. I can mention, for example, a recent lively debate over which is primary: religious consecration or mission; and another over which is primary: community life or mission. In both instances I think the Brothers were operating out of a model in which “elements are juxtaposed” rather than a model in which “dimensions are integrated”.

To grasp the real meaning of “integration”, it is necessary to differentiate between “distinction” and “separation”. Mentally, we can *distinguish* the three dimensions — consecration, mission, community — the integration of which constitutes the model of our apostolic religious life. But we cannot *separate* these three dimensions in space or time.

It is a very serious mistake to identify religious consecration with “spiritual” activities, community with the times we are literally together, apostolic ministry with specific apostolic activities. No. Integration is not equivalent to the juxtaposition of activities commonly associated with consecration, mission, and community. The word “integration” must be interpreted in its literal sense: the three constitutive dimensions have become one. They cannot be separated. We are, therefore, consecrated men twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; we are community men twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; we are apostolic men twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Balance and Discipline

Obviously the activities relating to the three dimensions must be kept in equilibrium. To achieve

sound balance and discipline in the ordering of our daily activities, we need the help of the *Rule*, the community annual program, and the personal program. But this equilibrium will be achieved more surely if our understanding of ourselves as Brothers is shaped by images that appeal to our imagination and heart and lead us to the authentic model within which and against which, every aspect of our life finds its meaning and importance.

Brothers, our unity and effectiveness as an international religious family at the service of the Church requires that we have a common understanding of who we believe God wants us to be and what we believe he wants us to do. In short, we need a common theoretical understanding of what it means to be a Brother. For this reason we have reflected upon the images that lead us to De La Salle’s “model” of the vocation of the Brother.

But, of course, describing who we are supposed to be is one thing; becoming who we are supposed to be is quite another. How do we become men who will radiate Christ to youth? Once again, we hear the Founder’s reply:

“In order to fulfill your responsibility with as much perfection and care as God requires of you, frequently give yourself to the Spirit of our Lord...” (MTR 3.2).

To represent Jesus Christ himself, we must, according to St. John Baptist de La Salle, be MEN OF PRAYER.

PART II: THE BROTHERS: MEN OF PRAYER

The starting point for understanding De La Salle's remarkable teaching on prayer is the *identity* of the Brother. We believe that God has first destined and then called us to respond to the needs of youth, particularly poor youth, for a human and Christian education. We consecrate ourselves totally to God in association with other persons experiencing a similar call.

Since by vocation we must represent Christ, we must be men of God, men of faith:

"Hence, since the object of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is to educate children in the spirit of Christianity, and to endeavor to procure them that spirit, it is of the utmost importance that the Brothers be... imbued... and abundantly filled with the spirit of faith" (*Collection*).

Walking with the Lord

To be men of faith is to "walk with the Lord", that is to say, to "live in fellowship with him". I find the biblical image of "walking with the Lord" immensely helpful. It seems to me that it has special relevance for apostolic religious. I am particularly fascinated by the description of Enoch:

"Enoch lived for three hundred sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God. Then he vanished because God took him" (Gen. 5:23-24).

Our life of faith is a relationship with the Father whose presence is real to us; a Father who loves

us; a Father who has chosen us to be his sons and to be Brothers; a Father who not only called us yesterday, but who calls us TODAY, this first day of a new decade.

Our life of faith is a relationship with Christ — the Christ who has risen and who is present to us in our everyday life; the Christ who is for us the WAY, revealing to us by his life and teaching what being human is all about; the Christ who is for us the TRUTH, revealing to us by his life and teaching who God is and what he is like; the Christ who is for us the LIFE, imbuing us with his Spirit, enabling us to live as sons of his Father and as his brother; the Christ who wants us to radiate his presence to youth.

Our life of faith is a relationship with the Holy Spirit, who leads us as he led Jesus (Gospel of Luke) and as he led our Founder; the Spirit whose gifts make it possible for us to manifest Christ to those confided to our care; the Spirit whose presence and gifts will enable us to touch hearts.

By the spirit of faith we are led "to look upon everything with the eyes of faith, to do everything in view of God, and to attribute all to God" (*Rule*, 5). This faith is the basis of the spirit of our Institute, the attainment of which "is of the utmost importance".

An Ardent Zeal

This spirit of faith kindles in us "an ardent zeal" for those confided to our care "in order to open

their hearts to receive the salvation revealed in Jesus Christ" (*Rule*, 7). I never cease to marvel that De La Salle uses the word zeal forty-six times in the sixteen meditations he prepared for the retreats of the Brothers. His language is uncompromising:

"In calling you to this holy ministry, God demands that you fulfill it with an ardent zeal for their salvation. For this is the will of God and whoever does God's work carelessly is cursed" (MTR 9.1).

"Your zeal must go so far that you are ready to give your very life, so dear to you are the children entrusted to you" (MTR 6.2).

Called by the Name of "Brother"

We live our faith as brothers — in fact we call ourselves by the name "brothers". We strive to be brothers among ourselves, brothers to the adults with whom we are in contact, older brothers to the young people confided to our care (*Rule*, 53).

We hope that by the fraternal character of our community life and by our active and selfless presence among those we serve, we witness to the possibility of creating true brotherhood and sisterhood among peoples and nations (*Rule*, 9).

Prayer: Moments in Time and Space

Prayer has been defined as a period of "heightened awareness" in faith of the loving presence of

the Lord and of our presence to him. Prayer is essentially a matter of "being with" the Lord in loving attention. These moments of "being with" God are truly precious. I mean "moments" quite literally — moments which are located in time and space. It is not helpful, in my opinion, to use the word "prayer" interchangeably with "life of faith". The life of faith is the relationship we enjoy with the Lord at all times. "Prayer" refers to specific moment of "heightened awareness" in faith, moments during which we communicate with God in praise, thanksgiving, contrition, petition. These moments nourish the relationship we enjoy with God throughout the day.

Over the years I have tried to illustrate the point I am making with a very personal example. My parents enjoyed a profound relationship for more than fifty years. I have a sharp recollection from my childhood days of my father telephoning my Mother from his place of employment once or twice every day without fail. These contacts by telephone were moments of "heightened awareness" of their presence to one another, moments which expressed their love for one another and nourished it. My parents were not literally conscious of one another throughout their working day, but their profound relationship was such that it shaped their vision, their judgments, their decisions, their actions from morning to night. I think that prayer is related to the life of faith in a similar way.

First and Principal...

De La Salle considered specific periods of

heightened awareness of and loving attention to God to be indispensable. Explanations and exhortations concerning prayer permeate his meditations, personal letters to the Brothers, and other writings. In addition he developed a method which he considered well-adapted for the specific needs of the Brothers and wrote an entire book explaining it. His profound conviction concerning the necessity of personal prayer is expressed in uncompromising language in the early *Rule*:

“The Brothers of this Institute ought to have a great love for mental prayer; they should look on it as the first and principal of their daily exercises and the one which is best calculated to draw down the blessing of God on all the others.”

I have been insisting that De La Salle’s teaching on prayer can be properly understood only in relationship to the identity of the Brother and to his life of faith and zeal. These words of Brother Charles Reutemann, written in 1980 for the Symposium on Prayer, are very pertinent:

“If union with God through self-forgetful service of the neighbor is the goal of the spiritual life, what is the place of intimacy with God in prayer, and why should prayer be the first and principal activity of the day? Very simply put, deliberate and concentrated exposure to God in prayer enables the self to become that kind of person who is able to lose himself in selfless love and service...”

“By making the distinction between the religious experience of God in prayer and the

love of God through service of the neighbor, one avoids over-stressing the primacy of a personal prayer life. Daily personal prayer is indispensable; but the primary business of life is achieved in the ‘marketplace’ where one stands shoulder to shoulder with the needful neighbor” (*Symposium: Mental Prayer*, pp. 170-171).

But, of course, we have to ask ourselves where we stand in relation to De La Salle’s conviction that meditation is the first and principal activity of the day. My impression of the “lived reality” is that meditation is not only *not* the principal activity, but it is in practice usually the first “exercise” to be dropped or curtailed when we are pressed for time.

One reason is perhaps that we have not really interiorized that orientation of the Founder. We do not personally “own” it. Another reason is that we are inclined to sacrifice the important for the urgent. As important as personal prayer is, it can be dropped without evident consequences. Consequently it disappears conveniently from our daily horarium to make room for activities we consider more “urgent”. A third reason is that we lack personal discipline. It is not easy to pray — or perhaps more precisely, it is not easy to stop what we are doing and begin to pray.

The Method of Mental Prayer

During the past year Brothers Michel Sauvage and Miguel Campos published their long-awaited Cahier Lasallien on the Founder’s *Explanation of*

the Method of Mental Prayer. The work consists of an original but perfectly faithful presentation of the text, extensive notes and commentaries, and several studies and documents on prayer. Brothers Michel and Miguel consider their contribution to be an “instrument of work”. I hope that this important book — or at least substantial portions of it — will soon be available in the various languages used by the Brothers of the Institute.

The remarks which follow are strictly personal views on the teachings of St. De La Salle on prayer. They are not the result of serious scholarly research, but rather of years of practical experience and reflection. If they serve, despite their limitations, to stimulate some serious thinking on our life of prayer, I shall be pleased.

Difficult Language

The language of the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer* is not easy. Nevertheless, I think that we can find there relevant and valuable guidelines. De La Salle says, for example, that prayer should take place in the depths of the soul (*fond de l'âme*). Other writers, both classical and contemporary, speak of meeting God “at the center” or “in the heart”. I think that De La Salle is insisting that to pray well, we have to be “in touch with the center of our being,” that is to say, alert, aware, attentive to the presence of God.

I see a parallel between “fond de l'âme” and the “heart” mentioned by the Founder in the first *Meditation for the Time of Retreat*: “God kindles a

light in the hearts of those whom he has destined to announce his word to children.” This kindling of a light in our hearts is not a once-in-a-lifetime experience. God continues to kindle that light — every day of our life. We have to be sensitive to the presence of the Lord who enlightens and empowers us, who makes new demands upon us, who leads us, perhaps, in new directions.

Our Chief “Occupation” in Prayer

A number of times already, I have expressed my conviction that prayer nourishes our life of faith, or more precisely, our union with God. This thought is consistent with that of the Founder when he asserts that the chief “occupation” in prayer “consists in cultivating a close relationship with God and uniting oneself interiorly to him.” That description is central, it seems to me, to De La Salle’s understanding of prayer.

It is not difficult, therefore, to understand his insistence on the “presence of God”. The essential activity of prayer is communion with God. While he included in his method time for considerations and reflections, he cautioned against turning prayer into an intellectual exercise. The heart of his method is “conversation” with God. Some look askance at the quantity of “acts” in the Founder’s method. But I think that his message is clear: prayer is essentially communication with God, not thinking about him. I am reminded of one of Anthony De Mello’s many stories:

“Here I am sitting next to you,” said God to

his devotee, “and you keep reflecting about me in your head, talking about me with your tongue, and reading about me in your book. When will you be silent and taste me?”

The “acts” of course are really sub-divisions of the four great movements of all authentic prayer: praise, thanksgiving, contrition, petition. That they are proposed as means to an end — that of fostering communication with God — and therefore should be treated as such, is clear from a careful reading of the text.

We can communicate with God, according to De La Salle, with many words, with few words, or with no words at all, simply being “before the Lord” in faith and love. It seems to me that our way of relating with our loved ones can help us to understand prayer. At times we have the need and the desire to speak at length, other times less so, and there are times when we are perfectly content simply to be with those we love.

I think that many of us follow these orientations in our prayer. After placing ourselves in the presence of God with the help of a passage of scripture and with short expressions of faith and love, we reflect briefly on some theme, inspired by the liturgy or by significant events of that particular day or week. Then we converse with the Lord, perhaps using the four major acts or their sub-divisions as points of departure. We pray with many or few words, as we wish. If we prefer, we simply remain in silence in the presence of the Lord, using a short ejaculation from time to time (as the Founder suggests) to help focus our attention.

Prayer and Life

There is one further dimension of De La Salle’s teaching on prayer that I want to emphasize: its link with life. Prayer was not an escape from everyday realities. On the contrary. De La Salle urged the Brothers to see the relationship between their prayer life and their daily service of youth. They should bring their experiences to the Lord. He tells them to intercede for those “confided to your care”.

“When you encounter some difficulty in the guidance of your disciples... turn to God with confidence. Earnestly ask Jesus Christ to make his Spirit come alive in you, since he has chosen you to do his work” (MTR 4.1).

Furthermore, De La Salle trained his novices to make a conscious link between their daily experiences and their prayer by concluding with a practical daily resolution. He seems to make this linkage a gauge of the quality of our prayer:

“If we leave meditation with a renewed desire to discharge our duties well, for the love of God and with the intention of pleasing him, we may be certain that God has guided us and will bless our efforts” (EMMP, p. 141).

The Word of God

Closely related to a commitment to regular prayer, is a love for the Holy Scriptures, especially the Gospel, which the Founder regarded as our “first and principal Rule” (*Rule*, 6). He urged the

Brothers to carry the New Testament on their person and to read from it every day. With St. Jerome he believed that the scriptures must *be eaten* by all true servants of God, in order that "they may subsequently be able to communicate and explain their secrets to those whom they are called upon to instruct" (Med. 170).

Some Brothers find it very helpful to read prayerfully and reflectively, each evening before retiring, the liturgical readings of the following day. Others prefer to read the books of the Bible in a consecutive manner. What is essential is to make a commitment to reading the scriptures on a daily basis and to be faithful to it.

Intimately associated with the reading of the scriptures is spiritual reading. The *Rule* speaks of spiritual reading as a prolongation of that contact established with the Lord in meditation on the Word of God:

"The Brothers arrange their work in such a way as to devote to spiritual reading all the time necessary to deepen their faith. The personal program takes this orientation into account" (*Rule*, 67a).

Many of us will honestly admit our carelessness with regard to spiritual reading. Generally the problem is not ill-will, but lack of personal discipline. Spiritual reading is a matter of great importance. We cannot grow in our life of prayer without it. For this reason it must receive more attention in the Institute today. On a community level we should ask ourselves what we can do to foster greater fidelity to spiritual reading. There are some commu-

nities which have decided to include several designated periods for spiritual reading in their weekly rhythm of activities. Certainly every community must assure that well-chosen books are added regularly and systematically to the community spiritual reading library.

Community Prayer

"The distinctive character of the Brothers' community is to be a community of faith where the experience of God is shared" (*Rule*, 48).

This description of the nature of the Brothers' community is clear, succinct, demanding, and challenging. It is a description of a community of men of God, of men who "walk with the Lord", of men who "say" to one another —directly and indirectly — "We believe!"

We meet together at least in the morning and in the evening to celebrate the liturgy of the hours in union with the praise and continual intercession of the Church (*Rule*, 71). I wonder, however, how many of us are really sensitive to this participation in the prayer of the Church. We need more reflection and discussion on this particular dimension of community prayer.

While the liturgy of the hours should normally provide the content of our community prayer, the same article clearly states that Brothers "may organize different forms of prayer by which to express the life of their community." The prayers

may be adapted forms of the prayer of the Church or more creative forms of community worship.

Reciting... or praying?

What is essential is that the prayer, whatever its content, be authentic prayer. Like personal prayer, community prayer should be a time of heightened awareness in faith of the presence of God to the community, and of the community to God. This awareness of God's presence is at the heart of our prayer. Recollection then is indispensable. How easy it is to fall into the trap of "reciting" prayers rather than "praying" — and feeling satisfied afterwards that we have done our duty. "The people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Mt 15:8).

But if we have to be careful about "reciting" the liturgy of the hours or praying the psalms too routinely and too rapidly, we also have to make sure that our "created forms" of prayer are really prayers. Just as De La Salle insisted that affections rather than intellectual considerations typify our personal prayer, so also should affections — that is to say, expressions of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, petition — typify our community prayer.

My personal opinion is that our "created" prayers are at times too didactic in content and tone, and devote an excessive amount of time to readings. I think also that since prayer is essentially a matter of relating with God, everything about the prayer and its presentation should foster a sense of reverence and attention to God's loving

presence. Excessively long or complex oral instructions and too many sheets of paper, books, and hymnals not only do not foster reverence, they militate against recollection. Again, the danger is that we "recite" prayers, rather than "pray".

Sharing the Experience of God

If our communities are really to be characterized by the sharing of the experience of God, then our prayers should frequently provide the opportunity for the Brothers to manifest their faith to one another (*Rule*, 71a). As the *Rule* suggests, this sharing can take several forms. Perhaps the most basic form is the proposing of petitions. When a Brother asks his Brothers to pray for a particular intention, he is truly sharing his faith. A second level is the sharing of short reflections, without discussion, following a reading. A third is the sharing of faith that occurs when Brothers actually pray aloud.

Sharing at these various levels comes easier for some Brothers than for others. But all can learn. Frankly, I believe that our progress in this area has been too meager and too slow. On the other hand, I have been deeply encouraged in my own life of faith as I have listened to Brothers, of many different ages and nationalities, share their relationship with God.

The Eucharist

As I proposed in my pastoral letter of 1988, to

believe in Jesus Christ — to be committed to him — is to “live with our arms outstretched”: it is to say YES to whatever God requires of us and YES to “all those unexpected and sometimes painful events which invade the tidy little world we like to construct for ourselves” (Robert Johann).

If we “live with our arms outstretched” as an act of worship of the Father, we thereby live “crucified” with Jesus Christ. When we live crucified with Jesus Christ, the Father raises us as he did his Son and fills us with the Spirit. We in turn, become fountains of living water for those confided to our care (F.X. Durrwell).

The Eucharist is a memorial: “Do this in memory of me.” In their own great tradition, the Jews “remember” in celebration the marvelous events of God’s action in history, “remembering” them so vividly that in some way they relive the events and participate in them. While the Eucharist is essentially different because Christ is sacramentally present, it has roots in the Jewish tradition. We “remember” Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension. We “stand” there with Jesus “with our arms outstretched” and share in his acceptance by the Father.

“In communion with the death and resurrection of Christ and listening to the Word of God, the Brothers are a community united in the same Spirit for the same mission” (Rule, 70).

We celebrate the daily Eucharist united first and foremost with the Brothers of our own community, but united also with our Brothers throughout the

world. The Eucharist is a celebration of our union with Christ, unique mediator with the Father, through whom we present to God our concerns, those of our students, and those of our loved ones and associates (*Rule*, 65).

When we enter into the sacred mystery by partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, it is not a matter primarily of our receiving Christ, but rather of Christ receiving us. *Lumen Gentium* speaks in inspiring language of this profound truth:

“Really sharing in the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with him and with one another... by communicating his Spirit, Christ mystically constitutes as his body those brothers of his who are called together from every nation” (L.G. 7).

The daily Eucharist is a precious occasion for renewing, in union with Christ and in union with our Brothers “from every nation”, our total consecration to the Trinity, opening ourselves to the reception of God’s gift of his Spirit.

Giving ourselves to God — and really meaning it — requires boldness, courage, and the readiness to take risks. I never cease to be moved by the words of Dag Hammarskjöld:

“Once I answered Yes to Someone — or Something. And from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, has a goal” (*Markings*, Whitsunday, 1961).

Note carefully, Brothers, that Hammarskjöld

does not say that after discovering the meaningfulness of existence, he gave himself to God. On the contrary. In the thralls of questioning, he gave himself completely to God — and found in that act of surrender the meaning for which he was searching.

The Eucharist can be that special daily moment when we — together and by association — say YES to God. We can be sure that we shall be heard.

Mary, Mother of the Church

The articles of our *Rule* on devotion to Mary, Mother of Jesus Christ and of the Church, follow perfectly the reflections of the preceding paragraphs:

“The Brothers discover the meaning of their own consecration in the total «Yes» that Mary spoke to God. They learn from her how to be docile towards the Spirit who brings them to the likeness of Christ...” (*Rule*, 76).

Brothers, honoring Mary every day, whether personally or in community, is an important dimension of our prayer life. While Mary is honored regularly in the liturgy of the hours and periodically in the Eucharist, we are clearly invited to cultivate a personal devotion to Mary, a devotion which can be expressed by praying the rosary or by some other regular practice. Communities also, in preparing their community annual programs, should be particularly sensitive to this orientation.

Existential Imperative

“Ordinarily the Brothers give to God at least two hours of each day in meditation, Eucharist, community prayer, spiritual reading and personal prayer...”

“...the Brothers regulate the order, times, and rhythm of their prayer in community. Then they live out in practice what they have decided” (*Rule*, 73-73a).

Capitulants to the 41st General Chapter gave considerable attention to article 73. A number of Brothers were not in favor of specifying the quantity of time to be devoted to prayer and spiritual reading. Their argument was that there can be no question of “legislating” the Brothers into chapel! They feared that presenting prayer in terms of prescriptions and obligations could foster an attitude towards prayer that is unhealthy and unsound.

These arguments have to be taken seriously. There can certainly be no question of limiting ourselves to a “moral imperative” which at least indirectly promotes a behavioristic approach to prayer. As Brother Charles Reutemann has written,

“It is question not of the moral imperative, ‘Yes, as a good Brother I ought to pray,’ but of the existential imperative, ‘Yes, I cannot be me, the kind of person I want to be, without a regular prayer life.’ For most Brothers this is the heart of the matter: how do I become driven by an existential imperative to pray, an imperative that will lead me to sacrifice time and sleep and convenience?” (*Symposium on Prayer*, p. 175)

Progressing towards the attainment of this "existential imperative" is a major objective of continuing formation. To emphasize the "moral imperative" is to risk creating attitudes of "prayer as a duty to be performed" — attitudes which we want to avoid at all costs.

But, personally, I do not interpret article 73 from the perspective of "moral imperative". What the article expresses is a decision taken by the capitulants to resolve questions posed by the considerable variation of opinion in the Institute concerning our life of prayer. We needed to say with no ambiguity that as men called to be ministers of Christ to the young, we are men of personal and community prayer. We needed to say clearly what that life of prayer entails. Some reference to "quantity" was very necessary.

What the Chapter said, in effect, was that a Brother is a certain kind of person, the kind of person in whose life prayer has a central part to play. The process of continuing formation must help all of us to arrive at that moment when we can say, "Yes, I cannot be me, the kind of person I want to be, without a regular prayer life."

A rather similar debate occurred during a discussion on personal prayer or meditation. Some wanted the *Rule* to reaffirm explicitly the long Institute tradition of personal prayer or meditation in common. Others were opposed, arguing that Brothers are responsible men and should be able to choose the time and place of their prayer. After a long and enlightening debate, during which various positions were expressed with great openness, the

Chapter decided to limit itself to directives that "each Brother has the primary responsibility for his personal prayer" (*Rule*, 72) and that "the community sees to it that each Brother has sufficient time and the conditions that are needed for reflection and personal prayer" (*Rule*, 50a).

In fact, there are many communities, and their number is increasing, which are freely choosing to schedule a time for personal prayer or meditation in common. Brothers find support and encouragement in the presence of their Brothers at prayer. I strongly support this movement, provided that the position of Brothers who prefer to pray in private is respected. Certainly we accept "existential imperative" as the goal. At the same time we have to be honest enough to admit that Paul's experience is true to our own: "I cannot understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate..." (Rom. 7:15).

AFTERWORD

I conclude, Brothers, with a prayer which St. De La Salle composed and included in the *Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer*. It summarizes beautifully much of what I have tried to say:

Jesus, Present in our Midst

"How happy I am, my God,
to make meditation with my Brothers,
knowing,

because you have given your word.
that we have the privilege
of having you in our midst.

You are present, my Jesus,
to pour forth your Spirit upon us,
as you promised through your prophets,
and as you did in fact pour forth
upon the apostles and first disciples,
when they were gathered in the Cenacle,
persevering in prayer
and united in mind and heart.

Grant me also the grace
to be intimately united in mind and heart
with my Brothers,
and to share the dispositions
of the Holy Apostles in the Cenacle,

in order that,
receiving your Divine Spirit,
in the measure you have destined for me,
I may share in your zeal
for the instruction of those you have willed
to confide to my care".

AMEN

Fraternally in St. De La Salle,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Brother John Johnston". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Brother John Johnston, FSC
Superior General