

A Prayer of Lasallians in Association: "Let Us Remember"

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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 Saint 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."³ 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...."⁴ The Founder considered the presence of God as one of the four interior supports of his Institute.⁵

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) as 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.⁶

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."⁷ 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."⁸

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 number 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 is that it is repeated so often 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 a 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 the Person to whom we are present is holy 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 as real the presence of God who is outside space and time; God 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 naïve (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 that is needed if we ever hope to experience in 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 of 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.”⁹

Endnotes

1. This brief essay was finalized by Brother Luke at Manhattan College on September 8, 2004.

2. Brother Luke Salm (1921-2009) was a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College for more than half a century. He was the first religious Brother and non-cleric to earn a doctorate in theology (STD) at The Catholic University of America (1955). He was an elected delegate of the District of New York to the 39th, 40th, 41st, and 42nd General Chapters of the Brothers of the Christian Schools; and he was a noted historian of the life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

3. *Rule of 1718*, Chapter 2, article 7.

4. *Rule of 1718*, Chapter 4, article 13.
5. *Rule of 1718*, Chapter 16, article 8.
6. See his *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, passim.
7. *Meditation* #96.3.
8. See the preface of *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*.
9. *Meditation* #43.3.