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## Praying My Story

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For many Brothers, private personal prayer as they have learned it and attempted it over the years is problematic. For some Brothers a sense of unreality arises when they hear talks on prayer or read books about prayer. Even some of the writing of John Baptist de La Salle on prayer does not carry much credibility. There are few Brothers who would say that they are satisfied with their personal prayer, not only because prayer is a lifelong process whose term is never reached, but also because a meaningful way of prayer in life today is itself obscure.

All of this does not mean that the Brothers do not pray. It seems to speak more realistically to the issue that the ways Brothers do pray are not obviously identifiable with the more classical descriptions of prayer. The deep disquiet among many Brothers about prayer is itself a hopeful sign. It speaks of the desire to move to an ever richer prayer life, and to a deeper consciousness of the reality that the Spirit prays within us in ways that we do not even know. It speaks also of the honesty of the Brothers in being faithful to the truth of their experiences and of not trying to fit their experiences within a model of prayer which they do not find authentic to them.

I would like to explore in this paper one way which Brothers in the North American Region seem to pray today. I will base these reflections on ideas rooted in traditional and contemporary literature on prayer including ideas in the writings of De La Salle. This will be put within the context of the experiences of the Brother themselves. One hundred randomly chosen Brothers commented on how they experience prayer and their comments, some of which are quoted, will, in part, form the backdrop for this exploration of prayer.

My thesis is simply that the prayer of the Brothers, which not being easily identifiable under the images of the more classical descriptions of prayer, may be seen under the image of *praying my story*.

In exploring prayer under the image of *praying my story*, I wish to move the notion of prayer out of the chapel and into life. This will also permit us to move from the language of formal piety to the language of personal experience; from the image of God as totally other to the image of God as providentially present; from the content of prayer as pious reflection on what has happened to others, to the content of prayer as exploring in faith what is happening to me. This may permit us to speak of the personal prayer of the Brothers today in a way which will touch on their own experiences and at the same time reaffirm the best in the traditional teaching on prayer.

### Praying from the Heart in Truth

The one condition which Jesus seemed to require of those who would honor God was they pray from their heart. He condemned those who pretended to honor God with their lips and allowed their hearts to be far from him. He dismissed them as hypocrites and liars even though they were

the professional “pray-ers” of the time. Jesus knew that they were not in touch with the truth of their hearts.

At the same time, Jesus directed his followers to pray in secret and with perseverance. He warned them not to mount words on words in prayer as the pagans do. The Father, Jesus assured his followers, already knows your needs and the outward show of piety may actually be a hindrance to prayer.

For prayer to be authentic, Jesus is saying, it is not necessary that the words be correct or abundant, or that the place be proper or that the agenda of prayer be precise, but that the heart be present.

When he was asked by his disciples to teach them to pray, Jesus prayed what has come down to us as the *Our Father*. But this is, first of all, a prayer that comes from Jesus’ own heart. We can say the *Our Father* as our prayer when it also comes from our heart; until then it remains the prayer of Jesus only.

The heart is the symbol of the authenticity of the person, the identity of the person. The heart is the real me. When Jesus bids us to pray from the heart, he asks that we pray not as we wish we were, or as other people might have us to be, but as I truly find myself to be. “I allow my prayer to come from where I find myself at the time” is the way one Brother expresses this. “I experience prayer,” another Brother says, “in the breaking through the frills and presenting just ‘me-ness’ to God.”

I may not be the person I feel that I should be, but that is not necessarily a hindrance to my prayer. I may feel disquiet or guilt, but these need not be obstacles to prayer; they are the feelings which can, in fact, carry the prayer. They can be the prayer if they come from the heart. We may not feel pious when we come to prayer, or be ready to honor God in words of praise. But that is not the point either. We praise God not by officially correct feelings of piety, not by saying words of praise, but by offering to God the deepest regions of our heart.

Words of prayer may be words of anguish or fear or hurt, as Jesus praised the Father in the Garden. They may be words of despair, as Jesus prayed on the Cross: “Why have you abandoned me?” They may be words of joy and acceptance as Mary prayed: “Be it done unto me according to thy word.” They may be words of confusion and regret as Job and Isaiah prayed. They may be words prepared in advance, or they may be spontaneous words. Or there may not be words at all.

Mary prayed at the foot of the Cross in silent anguish. Previously she had prayed in speechless feelings of distress and bewilderment as she pondered in her heart all the strange things her little boy was doing. And Jesus prayed in praise to the Father in the silence of his mountain retreat.

To pray has less to do with the words of prayer, or thoughts of prayer, or the silences of prayer, or the place or time of prayer, but has everything to do with the real person being present to God in the truth of who we are.

When we speak of praying in the truth of who we are we are speaking of being in touch with the truth of our life in faith. By the truth of our life we do not mean, of course, the truth of the

philosophers, which Saint Paul rejected; nor the truth of science, nor the truth of technology. Rather, we mean that truth which the Spirit will teach us and which will eventually set us free. It is not a truth, then, which we possess but a truth which possesses us. It is the truth which De La Salle refers to as “God himself and that which he has been pleased to reveal.”<sup>3</sup>

This is the truth of the Good News: it is that God is lovingly present to us; that he can draw good out of everything, even death; and that he is compassionately and creatively active in our life today. It is the truth which one Brother identifies when he notes that in prayer, “I sense more and more deeply that I am loved and loveable.”

The freedom which this truth gives us is the freedom to become more deeply who we really are, as we are called by God. In this truth we are set free from the fear of God, from the fear of our own selves, from the fear of sin and death, from the need to pretend, from the need to be someone who we are not. We become free to engage in the struggle of letting ourselves be before God in confidence. One Brother expresses this as the experience of being “not afraid to bring myself whole, entire, and with honesty before the Lord.” We are, in short, free to explore who we are so we may become who we are called to be.

The truth within us, which is God himself, is nourished by God’s truth in each of our experiences. The reign of God<sup>4</sup> grows like a seed which is planted in the soil and we go to bed and get up, and slowly, silently the grain appears and we do not know how it happens. We do not know who we are or who we are called to be except in the silence of going to bed and rising: the ordinary everyday events of our life. That is why, as we get in touch more and more with the truth of our experiences, we find our prayer becoming more and more real and simple. Authentic prayer is rooted in the truth of who we are in our relatedness to our real world. In this sense, prayer flows through the experiences of life; it mirrors life; it expresses life. Thus, I can speak of praying my experiences, or more specifically of *praying my story*.

### **Praying My Story**

When I speak of *praying my story*, I am speaking of the experience of being before God in the truth of who I am here and now. I *pray my story* when I explore in honesty those aspects of my life, past and future, which rush to me in the present. One Brother describes this way of praying as searching out “personal questions of sexuality, purpose of life, depression; or questions relating to developing a relationship with another person, or questions of work or transition, or feelings of anxiety flowing from ambiguity or wonderment, alienation, loneliness or joy; questions having to do with what in me is an obstacle to feeling whole again; what creative course of action can be taken to improve a situation; what is a similar situation with Jesus; what is God speaking to me here and now; what is being revealed in this situation that is an overlay to the literal situation; what consolation is contained in the Scriptures that is contemporary to my situation. I ask for God’s help and strength, and his grace to make his will known to me . . . .”

*Praying my story* is a traditional way of praying to which the Hebrew Scriptures refer when they speak of those ancient rituals of “remembering.” The Passover Meal was the ritual par excellence in which the Israelites remembered all that God had done for them. This remembering was not, of course, an academic exercise, but a prayer of the heart in which the current generation presented

to the Lord their story, which was the story of their ancestors as well. In ritual form, they re-enacted and re-understood who they were and who they were called to be by the experiences they were having and by the experiences which they had had. They could rely on God now because they could recall that God had delivered them in the past and was always faithful. In the Passover ritual they came before God as who they were: the chosen people praying their story of exile, struggle, hope and salvation. This is the paradigm of *praying my story*.

My story is different from my history. My history is composed of those happenings which have occupied my span of years. My history can be known by others who have lived with me, but my story can be known only by those with whom I wish to share it. The Egyptians knew Israel's history; they recorded the happenings in stone, but they did not know Israel's story. That was known only in the celebration of the Passover ritual as illumined by a faith which the Egyptians did not share. My story is my history known also in the light of the faith which assures me that God is compassionately and creatively at work in the world and in my life.

My story is not unlike the story of Israel. Sometimes I find myself like the original wanderers in the desert. My desert is my own confusion and emptiness. I have very little to follow but only the vague hope that it might all make sense one day. God becomes for me the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day leading me to a place which I do not know. I have heard that there is a promised land but that is only hearsay. My life is in disarray. My prayers are thinly veiled curses. I want to stop. I build golden idols. I harangue the leaders. I want to return to the fleshpots of my security. This is the desert of discovering who I am and what my life might mean. This human struggle, the Israelites realized, was a spiritual struggle as well. They ritualized it in the Passover and brought the light of faith to illuminate it.

Later, like Israel, I may joyfully remember the desert experience. Seen in the perspective of faith, the difficulties of the past seem providential. I am the better person for having lived through the struggle. I now know more about myself and God's compassionate dealings with me, and I may even celebrate certain aspects of that period of my life, as did Israel in the Passover ritual.

But there may also be aspects of that experience which are still not fully accepted in faith. They may be disquieting and hurtful memories which I prefer to forget. But a fleeting thought or a chance remark or a passing experience will sometimes direct my attention back to those distressing memories. The hurt and weakness which I would like to forget now rise again to be integrated into my story.

The Israelites had the courage to pray their story honestly as they experienced it. They prayed their sorrows as well as their joys, their fidelities as well as their weaknesses, their sordidness as well as their glories. The prayers of Israel, especially the Psalms, testify to the fact that Israel was deeply rooted in ambiguity. Joyful memories, acceptable memories, as well as sorrowful and disquieting memories became part of Israel's prayer. I am called to *pray my story* with the same courage and honesty even in the face of hurt and regret.

I also experience, as Israel did, that my story is constantly changing. The gradual evolution of the sacred Hebrew texts indicates the faith development of Israel's story. In the same way, new experiences shed meaning and light on my past experiences and call me to re-interpret them in

more honesty and truth. I experience my story beginning to take new form. Certain experiences which I had categorized or situations which I had resolved now re-emerge wanting new attention. My story is not going the way I had intended it. I experience my prayer as getting out of control. New elements, creative awarenesses arise as I *pray my story*. Experiences isolated before become related to one another in a new constellation which yields a new awareness of my sinfulness and God's loving providence.

If I am going to pray, one Brother says, I must be ready to "live with the implications of transformation." Jesus' challenge to Israel and to me is conversion: metanoia, change of heart. And Jesus' assurance is that the Spirit of truth will teach me and empower me to be changed. To come to the truth, to be transformed, to have a change of heart is to have my story re-changed, re-created by the Spirit. In this way, I experience my prayer to be the gift of the Spirit in me.

In praying their story, the Israelites focused not only on the past but also on the future. As the understanding of their past grew and developed in faith, their understanding of themselves and their God grew. The God who had given them the past and who had blessed them into the present would lead them into the future. Of this, the prophets were certain. When Jesus, the greatest of the prophets, tells the Passover story, its meaning opens out into the future in a glorious new way. Jesus tells the Passover by re-living it, and the future breaks into the present in the reign of God making resurrection possible.

In *praying my story*, I also find myself called into the future. I not only remember the past as past, but I see the past as holding glorious potential. The God who has been with me in my past is the God of creation and resurrection. The Spirit reveals who I am called to be in revealing the story of who I am under the aspect of my giftedness and weakness. In those experiences of giftedness, I realize God's providence and power of creation. I have been gifted because God has been active in my life. In the experience of my sinfulness, I experience God's compassion and power of resurrection. I experience my poverty, and my weakness speaks of the potential goodness which I squander.

In my giftedness and sinfulness, I experience the call to become more fully cooperative with God's love and more filled with his power and goodness. The God of creation and resurrection having led me to the present will be with me in the future in power. Thus, in the presence of the resurrected Jesus and empowered by the Spirit I get a glimpse of what Christ in me might mean.

In the process of *praying my story*, then, I bring together my past and my future into the present moment of experiencing the reign of God in my life. All of my pleasant and painful past and all of my hoped for and dreaded future is gathered into the present moment before God. In this way, my prayer leads into the discovery of who I am and who I am called to be. I am the person who is uniquely present to the love and mercy of God. The truth of my identity is revealed as I come to *pray my story* in the presence of the compassionate Father.

As the heart is the symbol of the authentic me, so in *praying my story*, which is praying with my whole heart, I come to discover who I really am.

## **My True Self and My False Self**

I do not *pray my story* without a struggle because there is always the temptation to idolize my story rather than to *pray my story*. My temptation to idolize my story is my tendency to be deceitful and selective in my story telling. It is to tell my story as I wish it were and, therefore, to deny who I am and who I am called to be. I idolize my story because I wish to be in control of my story and to interpret it as I will.

In *praying my story*, on the contrary, I seek the truth of who I am in the truth of each of my experiences and in the truth of all of them in relationship to one another and in relationship to God's love and providence.

The difference between *praying my story* and idolizing my story can be explored under the image of my true self and my false self.

When I speak of my false self, I wish to identify that part of me which is fundamentally self-centered, the self that would barter truth for flattery and security, and sacrifice honesty for self-aggrandizement and self-righteousness. This is the false self which puts its interests, ambitions, and glory as first priority. It is the self that exploits its resources in personal sin. It is the self of deception and sin. It is the self which is not in touch with the deepest realities of my heart.

My false self is symbolized by the Pharisee in the parable which, Luke tells us, Jesus spoke to those who were self-righteous.<sup>5</sup> The Pharisee goes to the temple to pray, ostensibly to be before God with his story. But instead of praying his story he idolizes his story, telling God how good and holy he is. He tells God how much he has kept the law and how significantly better he is as compared with this sinner in the back of the temple.

The Pharisee's way of telling his story is not prayer. He has distorted his story by making the telling an occasion for self-justification. He does not realize the deepest truth of his heart: that his story is really the story of God's love in him. The Pharisee wants to reserve his story for himself. He does not want to see his own sinfulness. His unwillingness to tell his story in complete honesty blocks his ability to be compassionate, and he thanks God that he is not like the rest of sinners. The Pharisee has idolized his story in his own interest thereby cutting himself off from God and from others.

The Pharisee is the symbol of that false self in me which selectively sees, selectively listens, and selectively experiences the truth. The Pharisee in me is the part of myself which wants to control my story in my own interest.

In *praying my story*, the love of the Spirit flows through me to the Father. The blockage of that flow, I experience as those lies in my life which constitute my false self. My false self is made up of duplicity, fear, lust and sloth, all crystallized in that grievous of all lies which erupts in my piety as the pharisaical need to make worthiness and self-righteousness the context of my prayer. It is that agenda of falsehood which undermines prayer because it denies the one fundamental truth: my sinfulness and God's goodness nevertheless.

My true self is symbolized by the publican. The publican is the outcast of the self-righteous society. He does not rely on his worthiness as he presents himself to God. He does not consider his goodness or holiness. He does not look to his state of perfection for his credentials to be before the Lord. He has no credentials, no worthiness, no righteousness. He does not so much as raise his head. From his place in the back of the temple, he prays his story with simple and profound honesty.

The publican is free from the need to have an agenda with God. He is who he is before God, and he has the courage and trust to let that be enough. His hope is not rooted in the rightness of his condition, but in the compassion of God. His prayer is not filled with comparison with others; rather, he is confident that God will accept him as he is.

The publican does not idolize his story. He *prays his story* by being who he is in his realization of God's love and his own sinfulness: "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner."

"Come to know yourself just as you are," De La Salle advises the Brothers. "Find fault with yourself accurately, unsparingly, so that when Jesus Christ comes to judge you, you will be able to face judgment without being afraid."<sup>6</sup> This is the stance of the publican who, in honesty before himself and God, is in the truth which sets him free from the fear of God.

My false self struggles against my true self to win my heart and to tell my story. Sometimes I experience this struggle in a fleeting moment when, in the recounting of my story to a friend, I find myself self-justifying or distorting the truth of an experience to appear more righteous. I may also find myself distorting a part of my story when I come to pray. I withhold from my prayer a particular relationship or behavior, or experience in my ministry or community. Indications such as these make me aware that my false self may be idolizing my story.

As I come to prayer, my false self and my true self play out the drama of the Pharisee and publican in me.

The Pharisee would overcome and remove the publican from the temple. The publican, however, free from comparison with others, confident of God's love, aware of his own sinfulness, is not disturbed by the Pharisee in the temple. And that is the way it is with my false self and true self. As I become more profoundly aware of my emptiness before God and his infinite goodness for me, I can make mine the prayer of the publican: "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner."

At the moment I recognize the depth of sinfulness in myself, the struggle of my false self against my true self takes an ironic turn. I can acknowledge my false self as a real part of who I am and offer my weakness to the Father as part of my story. The false self no longer has threatening power. I recognize it as part of me and begin the long process of integrating it into the *praying of my story*. With Saint Paul, I have the sense that if I will glory in anything it will be in my weakness. I sense that I can acknowledge my weakness not because of my strength but because of God's strength in me. My story now takes on new dimensions of truth: namely, the truth of trusting all of my self to the Lord. In this stance, I become present to God in a more honest and total way.

## Praying Is Being Present

To pray is to be present: to be present to who I am in God at this unique moment in my life. Whenever I am present to my story, I am present to God, because God is in my story. But in prayer, I wish to make this presence to God explicit. In prayer, I wish to gather the fragments of my life to become aware of who I am, not to perform some academic exercise of understanding myself, nor to engage in some moral exercise of evaluating myself, nor to engage in some moral exercise of evaluating myself, nor to enter some psychological process of reinterpreting my life. All of these things may happen, but my prayer is rooted in the simplicity of being present to God in the unfolding of my story in honesty.

My resistance to being fully present to my story and to God is a sign of my resistance to truth and the Spirit of truth. The constant struggle in my prayer is to come to truth, not as an abstract formula but to the truth of my existence and the truth of my story. This is coming to the truth of being “at home” in my story, of being loved by life, which is to say, of being loved by God.

The truth, of course, is that I am loved by God; that God accepts me. The truth is that God alone matters; that in God all of us live and have our being. The truth is that I am sinful and weak, filled with confusion and self-seeking. The truth is that I am in need of redemption. This is the truth which I resist in my self-protective stance and in my need to be self-righteous and so to be worthy. My struggle is against that truth which will set me free, because, ironically, my present bondage to my own self-centeredness gives me the illusion of being free already.

In *praying my story*, my prayer is not so much directed to God as the object of my search as it is to God as the context of love in which I find myself. In prayer, I come to know myself as I am in the presence of a loving God. My prayer is not, then, the theoretical stance of knowing about God, or the pious stance of imagining or talking to God, but the honest stance of knowing myself and my story as I am known and loved by God. “Prayer is a time for me to focus on my real self before God,” one Brother says, “to ask for his guidance and help, to celebrate his presence in my life, to thank him for my life.”

Whether we call our prayer meditation or contemplation, simple attention or mental prayer, there is no true prayer unless I am present to myself as I am in the hands of God. In this context, De La Salle’s emphasis on remembering the presence of God takes on special significance.

To remember the presence of God does not mean to affirm a theological doctrine, nor to think pious thoughts about God. It means rather to be aware of and to appreciate the truth of the experiences which constitute my story and to present myself in my story to God.

To remember we are in the presence of God is not an intellectual feat of which the devils are capable, but a moment of personal discovery, appropriation, and transcendence. It is a moment of integration and personal honesty of which the devils know nothing. It is to come to my true self as I am before God: that is, in love of myself, in honest acceptance of myself, and in judgment of myself, as God loves and accepts and calls me in judgment.

This I do not of myself but by the Spirit of truth who teaches me all truth and wars unceasingly against my false self. My false self would have me remember that I am in the presence, not of God, but of my lies and bid me call that a holy presence.

To remember that I am in the presence of God is both the beginning of the spirit of faith and an expression of the spirit of faith. As the Spirit of truth burns through the falsity of my life and enlightens me to know my story in truth, I am empowered to remember that I am in the presence of God. I begin to see “everything” in the light of faith.

This “everything” does not mean vague generalities pertaining to life as an abstraction, but precisely those concrete experiences which constitute my story. To be aware of “everything” with the eyes of faith is to be aware of my story with as much honesty as I am capable; or rather, to be aware of my story as precisely that truth which is taught by the Spirit of truth, and which sets me free.

The content of my prayer, therefore, will often be the content of my story. To remember I am in the presence of God is to remember that I am who I am in God’s hands. This is to situate myself in my real world of ministry, and community, of relationships and behavioral patterns, of hopes and fears, of weakness and giftedness: all sustained by God. To remember I am in the presence of God is to make my prayer very personal and very concrete.

### **The Tabor Experience and the Emmaus Experience**

There are two ways which Brothers describe as occasions when they experience *praying their story* in the presence of God. We may describe these ways in terms of the biblical events of the apostles on Mount Tabor, and the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Thus, we may refer to the Tabor experience and the Emmaus experience as two images under which we might explore the prayer experience of some Brothers. Although distinct, these images do not seem to be exclusive in the life of the Brothers. Rather, the prayer experience shifts from one image to the other under different life circumstances. Using these images, we can conveniently group together various descriptions of prayer; and at the same time, we can explore these descriptions in terms of certain aspects of the biblical events.

The Tabor experience can be described in terms of the apostles going up the mountain to be at this special time in the presence of Jesus. He is transfigured before them, and they hear the words of the Father proclaiming his beloved Son.

In this image of prayer, the apostles leave their ordinary path and ascend the mountain to be alone with Jesus. They experience Jesus under the special aspect of Lord and Savior: the quality which they will recognize again at the resurrection.

In the Emmaus experience, the two disciples walk on the footpath to town and a stranger catches up with them. They are discussing their problems, and the stranger enters into the conversation. The focus of their conversation is the concerns of the moment: the feelings and worries following the death of their friend and leader. They do not recognize Jesus; they are not even aware of the

profound impact that their sharing with the stranger is having on them. It is only in retrospect that they realize that their hearts had been burning within them.

We can use these two images as focal points to describe experiences of how some of the Brothers pray their story.

### **Praying at Tabor**

For some Brothers, prayer can be described more as a Tabor experience than as an Emmaus experience. Prayer is a ceasing of the daily work involvement. It is a going apart to be with the Lord. The prayer is at a special time, a time set aside regularly during the day or during the week. The place of prayer is also special: a chapel, a quiet room, a garden. In this sense, the time of prayer has the quality of being away from and above the ordinary experiences of daily life. The effort to focus on the presence of the Lord in majesty and glory is explicit, and this focus often has the quality of simple attention. The word of God experienced in the prayer confirms the Lordship of Jesus and comes as an encouragement to go back to ministry refreshed and renewed.

Brothers describe this kind of prayer as going apart in an effort to be with the Lord in solitude. These periods of prayer are scheduled regularly, perhaps for a twenty or thirty minute period in the morning, often in a quiet private place. Sometimes the periods of prayer are very brief. "I recite the Angelus and the Rosary in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament," one Brother says. At other times, the periods are more extended. "I find my prayer to be most significant when I take several days off for the sole purpose of prayer. This affords me the leisure to go within myself and really clear a space for God to enter. During these times, I feel a peace, a union, so to speak, with God."

In the Tabor experience of prayer, there is also the element of an explicit effort to be in the presence of God. "I empty myself," one Brother says, "relax my body and mind. I center in on the greatness and glory of God and then I wait for him to enter me." In my prayer, another Brother mentions, "I attempt to become more and more aware of the infinite majesty of God, to be thankful for my very existence." Another Brother notes, "I read a psalm or a passage from the gospels. Then I just sit and talk with God."

The sense of God's presence becomes strong. There is an awareness of personal acceptance and a feeling of peace and rest. "I feel closeness to the Creator when I am not busy, when I am relaxed and have no pressures on me; a sense of wholeness, integrity, and peace predominates."

At times, the Tabor experience takes the form of what De La Salle describes as simple attention. The acts of the method of mental prayer have been put aside. "I don't recall any content at these times," a Brother says. "All I recall is the feeling of inner peace, a closeness to God." "I mainly reflect on the presence and goodness of God: a prayer of simple attention, one of thanksgiving." My prayer is "just the feeling of being in the presence of God and trust in him."

In the Tabor experience of prayer, I *pray my story* in the simple awareness of God's goodness; I deepen my sense of who I am as a beloved son of my Father.

## Praying on the Road to Emmaus

For some Brothers at certain times, prayer takes more the form of the Emmaus experience. It is an experience that takes place “along the way.” There is no consistent time or place of prayer. The focus of prayer is on the problematic experiences of life. The Brother prays by exploring honestly the concrete experiences of life in faith. At the time, it seems to be only struggling with a problem, since the Lord is a stranger; and only in retrospect is it clear that “our hearts had been burning within us.” Although the Emmaus experience of prayer is often in solitude, it sometimes happens in faith sharing and conversations with others. The grace of the Emmaus experience of prayer is encouragement to trust that resurrection happens, that good is stronger than evil, and that God is at the heart of all our experiences.

Brothers describe this kind of prayer as taking place during the ordinary times of the day. “I pray, but not regularly nor at a specific time. I do it at various times,” is a way one Brother describes it. “I pray regularly, but at present this is spontaneous as opposed to the same time each day.” “I pray privately often but not at a specific time each day. Many things remind me of the presence of the Lord who loves me and calls me by name. When I am so reminded, I thank him and just enjoy the awareness of his presence and love in my life.” “I have shifted from the prescribed formal times of prayer to no real time, so that my prayer comes when I feel the need for it and can squeeze it in.” These are various ways Brothers describe this experience.

The Emmaus experience of prayer does not happen at a specific place. “I usually pray when driving the interstate highways,” one Brother says. Another speaks of making frequent reflective prayers while walking, or riding in a subway. One Brother incorporates “personal prayer in travel almost daily, and also during desk work.” “I make short prayers during the day while walking to and from school.” “I usually pray quietly at lunch, upon retiring, or whenever I have some time alone during the day.” “I might be driving, or walking through the airport; perhaps the plane is landing. I’ve opened a letter; I’ve been angry with someone; something in secular reading, like a newspaper, a novel, or an awareness of poverty strikes me and I pore over it in a reflective faith context.”

The focus of this type of prayer is often explicitly on the experiences of life. “I sit in my rocker across from my gallery of snapshots of loved ones. I reflect on God’s calling me to this moment. Then I often turn to my gallery for springboards into prayer,” one Brother says. Another remarks, “I try to make my prayer integrative, putting things together from my own life; how I experience living my life right now; feelings, external situations, and my own self-acceptance before myself and God.”

The confusion, sorrow, and hurt caused by a particular experience is often the content of prayer, much as it was for the disciples on the road to Emmaus. “I have found my personal prayer most meaningful when it has illuminated a problem or a situation which I found trying. One specific occasion was when I was frustrated in working with some students who seemed particularly difficult. I dreaded going to teach. Through prayer, I came to believe that my efforts were not in vain. Jesus just seemed to speak to the need for fidelity to those in need.” “An extended period of personal suffering and decision-making was grace-filled for me,” another Brother notes. “In it I grew to appreciate my call, my deepest desires, the value of friendship and brotherhood; and I renewed my own dedication.” Sometimes tragedy is the focus of the prayer. “My mother’s recent

illness was a gifted time for me in prayer; for a period of a week, at least, love, gratitude, acceptance were recurring themes in my prayers.” “My prayer is significant during times of very personal experiences: the death of my father, encountering another person in a deep loving relationship, times when I have been called to reexamine my commitment as a religious person, when I question the value of the work I am doing. These are the occasions of deep sorrow, joy, or anguish.”

The effort to commune with God is often without “method.” The time is experienced as telling my story sometimes to myself, sometimes to another, often explicitly in the presence of God. In retrospect, there is an awareness that “our hearts were burning within us.” “I believe that the Lord is involved in my daily life in ways usually mysterious and usually evident only after the fact,” is the way one Brother describes being in prayer. Another says, “I am spontaneously aware of what I believe to be God’s presence in people I am interacting with, meetings I am attending, ordinary office things that I’m busy with during a given day.”

### **Coming Down the Mountain – Going along the Way**

The effect of both the Tabor experience and the Emmaus experience of prayer is the deepening experience of the reality that the Lord is the Lord of my life. It is a moving away from idolizing my story to appreciating God’s presence and call within my story. There is a “sense of knowing where I am,” as one Brother says of the results of prayer. Another says, “I experience resignation, the ability to let God be God; and I become more accepting of what I cannot control.” Prayer leads to a “learning to trust in God and expect him to take care of what is lacking in me.”

One Brother remarks that, “My prayer is effective when I am at peace in my relationships with people generally and with the difficulties of my work and work-associated people in particular.” “Things in my life come into perspective and have a chance to settle,” another Brother remarks about the effect of prayer. And another: “Games I might have attempted to play become apparent and can be faced. People and their problems can be prayed with and for. I get a wider, deeper view of my life.”

As I *pray my story*, my experiences are put into a perspective of faith. Honesty and compassion emerge as significant values because now I see God’s truth and compassion in my life, and I wish to minister to others as God has ministered to me. One Brother summarizes this when he says, “In prayer I experience inner peace, an acceptance of myself, and more courage to reach out.”

### **On Being Absent from God**

Many Brothers describe the impediment to their prayer in terms of spending excessive hours in apostolic works or other kinds of involvements which fill their days and leave little time for prayer. While excessive work may make me absent from times of prayer, it does not automatically make me absent from God. De La Salle alluded to this when he wrote that the Brother ought not to distinguish between their duties of state and their means of spiritual growth provided that they did everything with a view to God. It is possible that we can be working excessively but also working prayerfully. It is also possible, of course, as many Brothers experience, that excessive involvement in activities draws them away from being present to the Lord. This is the kind of involvement which has less to do with time and more to do with not doing everything with a view to God. It is

the kind of involvement which feeds self-centeredness and ultimately self-aggrandizement. In this case, work is a way of being absent from my story making me incapable of being present to God.

Absence from God often manifests itself either in being absent *from* prayer or absent *during* prayer.

I am absent *from* prayer at times in my life when I desire to be apart from the Lord. I would rather not *pray my story*. The consciousness of the presence of the Lord awakens in me a fear because it challenges me to become present to who I am and who I am called to be. I resist being present to God because I cannot face in his presence that part of myself which I know is my false self. “Unless I clear up the garbage in my life and get beyond my defenses, I will not get in touch with the center of my life where God dwells. I need to reclaim the parts of my life that I have tried to ignore or push away such as my anger, my hate, my coldness, my emptiness,” is the way one Brother notes this.

I experience the presence of God as a mirror or light which illumines that false self with all its weaknesses and brokenness as it struggles for control of my heart. “So often,” another Brother says, “I feel unfaithful, like part of me hungers for the Lord and another can’t be bothered.” “What keeps me from the Lord is my personal weakness which seems to be a contradiction of what I say and think. In prayer, for example, I say ‘I love you,’ and ‘I adore you,’ but my actions are not in keeping with these sentiments.”

We are afraid or angry or hurt, and our solution is to divert our attention from God. We do not want to bring our story into the presence of God until we are perfect. We want to be like the Pharisee and tell God of our righteousness. “My hostilities and resentments” are the biggest obstacles in prayer, one Brother notes. Another remarks that “I let trivial little things clog my mind and my heart, keeping myself from becoming open, sometimes out of fear.”

I find that I am not giving time to prayer. I do not consciously take time to open myself to God. I fill my life with “trash,” another Brother says. I simply resist for weeks or months consciously and explicitly *praying my story*. The awareness of God’s presence may thrust itself upon me at unexpected moments, as “I walk along the way”; but I resist telling my story honestly to anyone, even a stranger. I want to be absent from the Lord.

I am absent *during* my prayer when I am distracted from an awareness of the presence of the Lord during a time when I more consciously wish to be aware of that presence. Sometimes I call distractions during prayer those wanderings of my mind or those tricks of my imagination which take my attention off the topic of prayer. These distract me from the words of the prayer or the scriptural passages which are to be the focus of my prayer.

These wanderings and images are nuisances because they disturb us out of our predetermined expectations of what our prayer time might be like, but they need not separate or distract us from God. They may, in fact, be the context in which the Lord wishes to be present to us. They may be the invitations to explore in faith the truth of our story to which these “distractions” point. It is not a matter of “baptizing” these distractions. It is a matter of opening myself to them as the content of my prayer. “I pray over the things or people which come into my consciousness until that part

of the prayer is over; then I just am quiet and occasionally say the Jesus Prayer,” is the way one Brother *prays his story*.

The real distractions during my prayer are the movements within me which take me from God’s presence by removing me from the presence to who I really am, and involve me with the demands of my false self. These demands are “my need to be self-centered, expressed in its many forms,” as one Brother notes. “Distractions of a very self-serving nature often get in the way of really meeting God in a personal manner.”

These distractions take us into concerns and imaginings which feed my need to be right and perfect, protected and praised. They are the obstacles to the Pharisee’s prayer. “The inability to let go” is a way one Brother summarizes his resistances during prayer. These are the daydreams of personal victories and ego-centered plans for personal security. “My knowingly not wanting to do what I must do,” because of fear or self-centeredness.

These distractions are also the vindications of past experiences which ward off the true call to constant conversion which I recognize in *praying my story*. “There is a fear of listening to the Lord. It might cause me to change,” one Brother acknowledges. These are also the reconstructions of memories, the idolizing of my story in such a way that I and not God is at the center of my story. Then I am trapped into self-pity and attachments, or, as the Pharisee experienced and one Brother notes: I cannot pray because of “personal anger over thoughts of individuals whom I perceive as not living up to my expectations.”

These distractions during prayer might even be pious thoughts which are not my own and which, therefore, take me from the truth of my story. They may be the reading of pious books or the reciting of the words of prayer which protect me from being honest with myself, from *praying my story* from the heart, but which safely fill the time of prayer.

These are the distractions which take me from the presence of God, because they make me absent from who I am. They situate me in falsehood. They lure me away from the truth about myself by taking me out of *praying my story*.

I experience this movement away from myself as those vague, undifferentiated feelings of not being “at home” with who I am. “The inability to be at peace within myself” is one Brother’s description of his awareness of distractions during prayer. To be at peace with myself means accepting myself and loving myself in honesty; and that, of course, means loving myself as the Lord does in imperfection and weakness. My obstacle to prayer, one Brother says is “my getting uptight because I’m not performing as perfectly as I want to be seen; the whole gamut of self-hate prevents me from just being myself and knowing that I am loved and loveable.” My closedness: not accepting myself, not accepting the way I am, not being connected to that deepest center of myself; not accepting all of my life, and all the people I hate, despise, and can’t stand.” This is a Brother’s experience of resisting the presence of God even during times of prayer.

Distractions *during* prayer and absencing myself *from* prayer are both rooted in my resistance to being honestly in contact with my story in the presence of God. My resistance to being fully present to myself and God manifests itself sometimes in the gross and flagrant way of absencing myself

from prayer by simply not taking time to pray. Or it may manifest itself in the more subtle way of being absent during prayer by idolizing my story.

Idolizing my story in all its forms: resisting ascending the Mountain of Tabor or honestly telling my story “along the way,” is an indication that my false self is still powerful in my life. This realization speaks to me of the truth that *praying my story* is a lifelong process. It is also a call to patience, confident that prayer is in God’s time.

The distress which the realization of my resistance *during* prayer and *from* prayer causes me is itself an indication that the Spirit of truth activates my life unceasingly. I would not be aware of my reluctance to *pray my story* unless I were moved by that Spirit. My false self is exposed by the Spirit of truth gently, compassionately but relentlessly. And nowhere do I experience my false self more forcefully than in my capacity to be absent from who I really am.

## Summary

This paper has been an attempt to explore on way which some Brothers in the North American Region seem to pray today. What has been said might be summarized by suggesting that a Brother today experiences prayer when he allows himself to be led by the deepest truth of his heart; when he realizes the purgation and struggle of being in the face of his life; when he recognizes himself called to explore and integrate the elements of his story not in the light of his self-centeredness, but in the light of the radiance of Jesus as Lord of his life; when he shares his story with the Lord along the way in brief and long moments of reflection; when he experiences the peace of honest self-acceptance which energizes him to a free and creative response in ministry, and which tells him that it is good for him to be here; when the burning in his heart is a purging of self-centeredness and a trusting in God, even though he is aware only in retrospect; when he experiences the call to go down the mountain and to continue along the way so as to return to his brothers and sisters in more courage, more acceptance and love; when he feels impelled in his ministry to spread the Good News that the Lord has risen and that his Spirit is indeed in each of us activating us to *pray our story* to the Father.

## Endnotes

1. This paper was previously published in *Mental Prayer in the Life of the Brothers Today: A Tercentenary Symposium* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1981), a collection of papers in different languages on prayer that was published during the tercentenary celebration of the foundation of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. While the author here references the prayer life of Brothers a number of years ago, what he wrote in 1981 seems to be relevant even today for the prayer life and spirituality of Lasallian educators.

2. Brother Joseph Schmidt, who is a De La Salle Christian Brother of the District of Eastern North America (DNA), has for many years been a lecturer, spiritual director, and counselor. He is the author of *Praying Our Experiences* (1980), *Everything Is Grace: The Life and Way of Thérèse of Lisieux* (2007), and *Praying with Thérèse of Lisieux* (1992).

3. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arnandez FSC and edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Francis Huether FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994), #193.1.

4. *Mark 5:26-29*.

5. *Luke 18:9-14*.

6. *Meditations of John Baptist de La Salle*, #205.1.