

GUIDE FOR FORMATION – 6

THE WORD OF GOD – THE SOURCE OF OUR LIFE (1/3)

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The Word of God is one of the major contemporary themes when we study the Holy Founder, as well as the charisma and the mission which he incarnates in the church. In these reflections I intend only to point out the main lines of a very rich schema which can be deduced from the life and writings of the Holy Founder, and in which he presents to us the Word of God as the soul and life of the spirit of the Institute, of the prayer of the Brother, and finally as our "first and principal rule".

I divide this presentation into four parts. In the first we consider the living tradition in the church in which the Holy Founder takes his inspiration. In the second we study how the Founder personalizes this tradition and offers his brothers a special way of living it. In the third we will see how the actual rule applies it in our days. We end with some suggestions taken from the Guide of Formation to aid our formation staff in living the Word of God.

1. THE WORD OF GOD IN THE PRAYER TRADITION OF THE CHURCH.

Continual reading has always been the base of the prayer of the church. Christians and religious have always made the reading of the Word of God the pillar of their life of prayer and in it have found inspiration to interpret their life as a dedication to God and to men.

The proximity of the Word of God, its daily and systematic reading, and assiduous contact with the revealed word have been and are the door of access to encounter with God and with Jesus Christ. In the office of the hours, in the eucharistic liturgy, and in each prayer of the Christian community the Word of God is present as the nucleus.

How do the Christian people read the Word of God? In a very simple manner. Seek a quiet time, a tranquil place. Take the bible there awaiting you. Open and read. Without haste. Never mind if some things tell you nothing. This is normal. You will arrive at a point that will give you food for thought. This is **reading (LECTIO)**.

Keep in mind whatever strikes your attention and reflect on it. Try to see what God wishes to say to you here. Study it. This is **MEDITATION**. It is an effort of the mind, an intellectual work. You have to uncover the message here concealed.

In the measure that we discover the message which God is here giving us, there arises in our heart a loving dialogue with Him, a sentiment of gratitude, of adoration, of generous giving of self, of repentance. This is **PRAYER (ORATIO)**. Prayer springs from the heart, it takes place in the depths of the soul. It is fundamentally affective. It embraces the whole person which from within enters into dialogue with Him. It is a loving encounter with the one we know loves us.

The monk of the contemplative life, or the Christian in the occasions possible to him, can remain a long time immersed in this prayer of the heart. It is **CONTEMPLATION**. Without words, without reasoning, is nourished this sentiment of faith, this interior gaze, which the heart has won for us. One remains in silence embracing the gift of God, being with Him. The contemplative remains like Mary, at the feet of Jesus.

But for most Christians, we have our unavoidable obligations, and like Mary we have to immerse ourselves in the thousand tasks of the daily grind. We have to go forth and act. We go forth from prayer to our work but we always carry "something" in the heart. And this "something" is this sentiment of faith that the Word of God has left us in the heart, and which will give us strength to live christianly our daily schedule. This is **action (ACTIO)**, with all its inner meaning. The Christian works for the construction of the world out of the orientation and strength born of the heart. It is the precious vital synthesis of Saint Benedict: **ORA ET LABORA**.

Now we will have a rapid overview of the Christian tradition of the way the Word of God is the soul of prayer and of the Christian life.

2. LA SALLE AND THE WORD OF GOD.

We do not propose a detailed study. Fortunately there are studies very well done. Being the key theme of our spirituality, I will draw the attention of the studios to some of the more important:

VARELA, L., *"Biblia y espiritualidad en San Jan Bautista de la Salle"*. Salamanca, 1966

TEMPRADO, A., *"La 'Palabra' según La Salle. Mística y empleo de la misma en cuanto comunicación espiritual"*. Salamanca, 1977.

SAUVAGE, M., *"Les citations néotestamentaires dan les Méditations pour le Temps de la Retraite"*. Tournai, 1959.

CAMPOS-SAUVAGE, *"Explication de la méthode d'oraison"*. Rome 1989.

I'll give a synthesis of how La Salle thought, for the Brother, of this subject of prayer springing from reading. How did the Holy Founder envisage reading (*lectio*)? The Word of God and especially the New Testament was the companion volume for the Brother. I still marvel at how the Holy Founder, being a priest and living in an atmosphere in which the Word of God is, let us say, an appurtenance of the altar and of the priestly ministry, took the Word of God of the altar and priestly ministry, and put it in the pocket of men who by positive choice remain laics.

I believe that this was a stroke of genius, and today we continue to draw consequences for us Brothers, and for giving expression to the style of life that we have come to call the Lasallian family.

The Brother, in the mind of the Founder, nourishes his life and his mission out of the Word of God which he carries "embodied" on his person. The Rule of 1718 calls upon the Brother to each day at least, read on his knees out of respect and veneration for the divine words there contained, a page of the New Testament at the beginning of spiritual reading. It prescribed as well that some passage of the New Testament be read at the beginning of dinner and of supper.

The Saint, well aware of the prayer life of the Church, knew how to find these daily moments for the Brother to make the reading continuous in its way.

Reflection and study of the Word of God have been done since the origin of the Institute under two forms: spiritual reading and the study of catechism. They have been two exercises of the community, which together with the Sunday conference of the Brother Director, were the sources the Rule offers us to nourish doctrinally our theological reflection upon the Word of God.

The same Holy Founder wrote "**The Duties of a Christian towards God**" as an element of the formation and of doctrinal and catechetical development of the Brothers. This was the Founder's view of **MEDITATION** for the Brothers.

From this perspective which we see developing we better understand why the Holy Founder tells us in chapter four, paragraph one, of the Rule of 1718, that "*the Brothers of this Institute shall love particularly the holy exercise of (mental) prayer (oración), which they should consider as the first and principal of the daily exercises, and which can draw down the benedictions of God on all the rest. They shall be careful to make it every day at the time, and for as much time, as the Rule prescribes.*"

Apart from the normative aspect which can come to our attention, there is a deep reality at once rich and suggestive. The **MENTAL PRAYER** which the Holy Founder proposes to us is neither more nor less than the embracing of the Word of God in the heart, in the depth of the soul. It is to allow the

Spirit to awaken in our soul that sentiment of faith which will accompany us throughout the day and will animate all our actions.

La Salle knows from personal experience that access to the heart, basically to the soul, is not easy. It requires preparation, it takes time. And despite the daily work, and to give life to the daily work, La Salle seeks for us a quiet time, lengthy, so that we can little by little become profound in the holy exercise of mental prayer. In the Rule of 1718, chapter 27, he writes, "*At five o'clock there will be a brief quarter of an hour of vocal prayer followed by mental prayer until six*".

To pray in the heart requires time. The encounter with God in the depth of the soul is a point of arrival not of departure. We are not contemplatives, but still we have to approach action with something in the heart. Mental prayer is the crucible in which the Word of God and the life of the Brother fuse, whence faith and zeal become a single spirit, the spirit of the Institute.

From this it is that the Founder wishes to assure each Brother a sufficient and tranquil time for mental prayer, so that he can go to his daily work-day with something in the heart. And each time that during the day, he descends to the depths of his heart, in these storms that arise, in remembering the presence of God, or in making an act of adoration, there springs up anew that sentiment of faith which the Word of God left with him in the morning mental prayer.

This is the style of **ACTION** (*actio*) which the Founder proposes to his Brothers. We go each morning to work with something in our hands. We carry our brief-case with notes, our records, books and materials. We have in mind a clear plan of work - ideas. The Brother when he goes to work ought to carry in his heart this *poso* spring, which the word of God has left him in mental prayer, which rises to his lips in his first contact with the pupils, in the morning reflection, and which will accompany him throughout the day and will give him a sense of ministry. And so the Founder says clearly that mental prayer in which the Brother prays in his heart the Word of God, is the exercise which can draw down the blessing of God on all the rest. The Brother is a contemplative in action.

Thus we have a succinct, and I hope suggestive, outline of how the Word of God is the soul of mental prayer and of the spirit of faith of the Brother. It is the motor of our life.

The Holy Founder within the context of his epoch knew how to offer the Brothers a road to follow in this process of the praying tradition of the Church, and a methodology, and even norms for carrying it out. Let us say that he knew how to find the just equilibrium required by the epoch.

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