

**A READING GUIDE
TO THE COMPLETE WORKS
N° 3: The Explanation
of the Method of Mental Prayer**

Br. Alain Houry

On July 16th 1734, the bones of John Baptist de La Salle were solemnly transferred from the church of Saint Sever in Rouen to the recently built chapel at St Yon. The 5th General Chapter had been called to be present at this transfer. On the same occasion the decision was taken to print "*the Explanation of the first part of mental prayer by M. Jean Baptiste de La Salle*".

20 years later

The 1739 edition that we have must be the one referred to above. Above the seal of the Institute, all that there is is a strange title: "*Explanation of the method of mental prayer. By monsieur J.B. De La Salle, Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. First part*".

There are no other indications, neither the name of the printer, nor the permission to print. This work was obviously solely for the use of the Brothers and not intended for public release. **Rigault** (I 480) believes that, in spite of the 20 intervening years, we can be sure that this text is a faithful transcription of the original document: too many of his closest collaborators still occupied posts of responsibility. All the same, it has to be said that the actual printing of the work leaves much to be desired: incorrectly placed or printed headings, words transposed, pagination interrupted and certain pages left out. The edition of the Complete Works has tried to correct these evident errors.

Blain (2 287) seems to refer to an edition which was printed during the lifetime of the Founder for use by the novices. The Founder explained the method to them "in parts and in detail. He believed that he would be doing them a necessary service if he composed a small book about it and had it printed for their use". There is no trace of this book, if it ever existed. The decision of the 1734 Chapter gives no indication that it is calling for a re-edition. What is more, the 1739 edition has no foreword, which would have been necessary if it were known that there had been an earlier edition.

It is enough to look at the plan to see that it corresponds exactly with the Method of Mental Prayer in the *Collection* (R 7) and the developments it includes. In the plan included with this article, we have tried to highlight parallels in structure, in the continuous numbering of paragraphs adopted for CL 50, and in the way in which chapters are numbered. At the same time, we have provided a table indicating the corresponding pages in CL 14.

A difficult text to read

It is still difficult to read the text. It presupposes a considerable knowledge of spiritual and apostolic life, and of mental prayer itself. For example, the link between prayer and life, or the line of conduct to adopt when we are distracted. The work does not reflect to any extent the life and spiritual experience of De La Salle, his first Brothers and pupils. A few passages reveal a certain lyricism, especially in references to the presence of Jesus Christ among his Brothers (EM 2,24-32) and in prayers to the Child Jesus (e.g. EM 8,202). And it is a lyricism we do not necessarily appreciate.

A glance at the table of contents reveals a heavy structure of 21 acts. There is a danger that it will make us forget its essential purpose: to help us find our way around this work. We will not get very far in our reading of this difficult work if we do not set out with some form of guidance. In fact, we can easily come to the conclusion that we are not made for making mental prayer. One day when I was speaking to a Brother about prayer, he said to me: "Do you really think I've got the brains to make mental prayer?" As if mental prayer were a complicated meditation for superior minds! Is that the reason why John Baptist de La Salle composed a "method" for his Brothers?

De La Salle's book on mental prayer is not easy. Nor is the actual "exercise"! The EM shows that the mind *does not pass suddenly from consideration of material things to those that are purely spiritual*. "This appears very difficult for many and altogether impossible for others" (3,111), although, in this application of the soul to God (1,6), "*the soul occupies itself with what is proper to it in this life, which is to know God and to love him and to take all the means necessary to achieve these two ends*" (1,5). In his catechism as a continuous text, the Founder gives us the same teaching about man: "His first and principal occupation must be to know and love God, since it is only for this purpose that he is in the world; it is also by this means that he is an image of God, and must resemble him in this life" (DA 103,0,9).

From this point of view of faith, "*prayer is a raising of our heart to God...and so we speak to God more with our heart than with our mouth; it disposes us to tend to God, to rise towards him and to unite ourselves to him intimately through a merging of affections, so that we neither wish nor desire anything other than him, or what relates to him*" (DA 401,1,4). "Heart", "affection",

"desire" - there is no question here of an intellectual meditation, but rather of learning to love. However we must remember that *"we cannot acquire this virtue by ourselves, for it is God who gives it. But providing that we are well disposed to receive it, his pleasure and delight lie in sharing it with us...He wishes nothing better than to see that we are constantly inclined and tend towards him"* (DA 201,4).

The whole of the Lasallian method consists in helping us to move away from our egocentricity. Without a method, beginners could be put off permanently from the spiritual life, regarding as impossible *"what subsequently and by frequent practice of mental prayer would perhaps become for them not only possible but easy and pleasing"* (EM 3,113).

John Baptist de La Salle, a man of mental prayer

The Founder of the Brothers speaks from experience. If we are to believe Blain (in particular 2,290-298 and 319-321), mental prayer occupies an important place in his life: in it he finds his natural element as well as his starting point (1,113). Towards the end of his life, he spent three hours a day in mental prayer when travelling (2,319) or when he stayed at St Nicolas du Chardonnet (2,179), and whole days at Grenoble (2,99). Often his active life did not allow him to find enough time during the day for both work and prayer: heavy sleeper that he was, he learnt to spend whole nights in prayer (2,321), especially when he needed to know God's will for himself (1,229), or for his Brothers who were tempted to abandon their state (2,369). To do this he learnt how to fight sleep (1,145). Was this a kind of spiritual gluttony in a person who found frequent consolations in prayer (2,319)? As someone who warned others not to seek emotional satisfaction in mental prayer (R 14,3,3), he experienced dryness during persecutions (2,96) and teaches us how to behave in aridity (R 14,3,4; MD 35).

He taught the novices to make mental prayer (2,164), and with some success, if we are to judge by the exemplary lives of Brothers like Barthélemy (2 ab,20), Joseph (id.81,90), Jean Henry (id.74-76) or Louis (id.81,90). The fate of some "illuminé" Brothers (2,166 and ab.117) would seem to show that there was a need for a method of mental prayer.

A method of teaching interior life

The time was ripe for a Quietist movement. Blain (2,285) speaks of *"the sweet and subtle poison"* of this doctrine *"which in essence suits indolence and natural slackness and encourages self-love and pride"*. "As [M. De La Salle] often insisted [when teaching his disciples], it is not repose that you must seek in mental prayer, but the light to see your faults, your vices, your passions, and the strength and grace to correct them. You must apply yourselves to purgative mental prayer" (id.286).

The method of mental prayer proposes spiritual combat in connection with the presence of God (EM 2,21.43.47.59.80; 3,101; 4,142), the act of contrition (5,156s), remorse (9,220s; 13,278; 17,313), resolutions (9,228; 13,282; 17,317), the spirit of a mystery (8,192.195.200) or of a maxim (15,298s). This moral aspect of mental prayer which is present also in the Collection (R 14,3,3; 16,3,7), is a constant in the spiritual life, but the Founder's teaching method gives it a place in the *"affections of the will"* and in this way keeps it free of moralism. Detachment from sin and creatures is only the negative, but necessary, side of attachment to God: love and the knowledge that leads to love. "For the application to God has this characteristic quality: being incompatible with application to external and tangible things because God is spiritual, and not being able even to fit in with application to spiritual creatures, because God is infinitely above created things however detached from matter and however perfect they may be, in proportion as this application occupies the mind, in the same proportion it drives out application to creatures. And as a necessary consequence, *the more a soul applies itself to God, the more it detaches itself from occupation with creatures* and consequently from the attachment and affection that it has had for them because as the one produces the other, the privation of one in a soul necessarily causes the privation of the other" (EM 1,11).

Let us not make the mistake of seeing intellectualist language in the pairs *sensitive/spiritual* or *exterior/interior* (Cf. EM 1,9) because the word *mind* (spirit) is often used to indicate *soul*. This recourse to "conversations of the mind" (R 16,3,6) and to the reflections they produce is based on a concept of love in which love is not separated from the knowledge of the person one loves. This is a humanistic concept which reflects the culture of the time. This makes it important to reason correctly (EM 3,84) and to reflect with accuracy (EM 3,85). The most significant pair in mental prayer is *creatures/God*. It alone enables us to understand formulas such as the ones we have just read or the following astonishing approach to interiority: "We call mental prayer an interior activity because the soul occupies itself with what is proper to it in this life, which is to know God and to love him" (EM 1,5). The way of teaching the method of mental prayer consists entirely in introducing the learner to it progressively, as is seen in the parallel drawn with looking at beautiful pictures (EM 3,104s), in which explanations gradually give way to the intuitive understanding of Beauty.

That is why the most profitable way of setting about studying the *Explanation of the method of mental prayer* is to meditate (this does not fall strictly into the structure of 21 acts):

- on the different ways of speaking about the presence of God (EM 3,84-121);
- on the different ways of occupying oneself regarding the act of faith (EM 8,204-212; 12,263-270; 16,305-306);
- on the Note of salutary advice (EM 19,325-331). ●