

THE PRAYER OF THE TEACHER BEFORE SCHOOL

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The Prayer of the Teacher before School has been widely known and diffused throughout the Institute especially during the present century. It has been often recommended and adopted by various school faculties as a sharing with others in the Lasallian Mission. Some cards containing the prayer wrongly attribute it to John Baptist de La Salle but, as we shall see, this is not correct. The present article sets out the origins of the prayer and traces some aspects of its «Lasallian» history.

1. Origin of the Prayer

The prayer in its original form is to be found in Rollin (died 1741) in his celebrated *Traité des Etudes, Livre VIII, 1° Partie, Article XIII*. The prayer is preceded by a series of questions and answers concerning the nature and function of a teacher and is best understood by reading the prayer as a summary of the principles which are implicit in this dialogue of questions and answers.

«What is it to be a teacher entrusted with the education of young people? It is someone into whose hands Jesus Christ has placed a certain number of children whom he has bought back by his blood, for whom he has given his life and in whom he dwells...»

Why has he entrusted them to him? Is it mainly to make poets, orators, philosophers or learned persons out of them? Who would dare to say this or even to think it?

He has entrusted them to him so so as to preserve in them the precious and inestimable reserve of innocence which he has imprinted in their souls by Baptism in order to make true Christians of them.

There you have the end and the aim of the education of children. All the rest are nothing but the means.

Now, what grandeur, what nobility does not so honourable a commission bring to all the activities of a teacher. But how much care, attention, watchfulness and above all dependence on Jesus Christ does it not also require?

It is this latter quality which constitutes all the merit and, at the same time, all the consolation of teachers. To lead children, teachers need ability, prudence, patience, kindness, firmness, and authority. What a consolation it is for a teacher who is completely convinced that it is Jesus Christ who gives all these qualities and that he bestows them

on those who pray for them with humility and perseverance. Of such a person could it be said with the prophets:

**You, Lord, are my patience and my strength;
You are my light and my counsel;
You make the young people confided to my care submissive to me;
Do not abandon me to myself for a moment;
Grant me, for the conduct of others and for my own salvation, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and piety and, above all, the spirit of the fear of the Lord."**

2. History of the Prayer in the Institute

It is well to recall that, at the origin of the Institute, the Brothers instituted the following practices for morning and afternoon classes.

For the morning. The Rule of 1705 stated:

"The Litany of the Child Jesus will be recited to dispose themselves to go to school and to ask Our Lord as a Child for his Spirit so as to be able to communicate it to the children for whom they are responsible."

For the afternoon classes. Saint Joseph, foster-father was honoured:

"At one o'clock the Brothers gather in the oratory to recite the Litany of Saint Joseph, Patron and Protector of the community, in order to ask for his Spirit and assistance in the Christian education of children."

The changes to both these prayers is a study in itself which this present article will not treat. It should be noticed, however, that the Institute modifies Rollin's original text by introducing its own petitions to Jesus, Mary, St. Joseph, the Guardian Angels and St. John Baptist de La Salle.

The first instance of the prayer in the books of the Institute appears to be in an Italian edition of the *Exercices de Piété* printed in Torino by the publisher, Mariotti, in 1835. Incidentally, this was the same publisher who brought out in the same year an edition of Brother Agathon's «*Twelve Virtues of a Good Master*», a book so highly prized by the young Don Bosco, who discovered it in his work with the Brothers in Torino! We know that Brother Agathon's work itself was greatly influenced by Rollin's *Traité des Etudes*. Was there some casual contact with Rollin's work which led the Brothers to the adoption of this prayer as well?

In France, the first appearance of Rollin's Prayer in the Institute appears to be as a note on page 12 in the 1837 edition of the *Conduct of Christian Schools*. It is, however, printed in the *Exercices de Piété à l'usage des Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes*, published by Pélagaud, Lyon, in 1858. This work, comprising three different works, was published as a single volume under the title «*Manuel du Chrétien* » containing the following items:

- 1) **The Psalms of David, and the New Testament** (approbation of Mgr. Barrett, Vicar-General of Liège, accorded on 17th June 1823);
- 2) **The Imitation of Jesus Christ** (printed by Pélagaud at Lyon in 1853);
- 3) **Exercises of Piety for the use of the Brothers of the Christian Schools** (printed by Poussielgue, Paris, 1850).

3. How was the prayer approved?

As already mentioned, the *Manuel de Piété* of 1877 includes this prayer for the first time.

It does not appear to be as a result of any Chapter decision. Was it adopted simply by usage?

Whatever the explanation, there appear to have been some Brothers who mistakenly associated it with the very origins of the Institute as we shall now see.

The Rome Archives contains two typed pages (without any indication of the author) which follow the history of this prayer in the Institute. This enables us to follow the following aspects which are a straight translation from the original typed pages.

"Brother Alpert wrote to the General Chapter of 1894 suggesting a number of changes to the text of this prayer:

a. replace the word "*children*" by the word "*souls*" so that it is appropriate for every situation i.e. textually "*it is you who makes the children [souls] submissive to my care;*"

b. modify the final phrase as follows: "*I beseech the Most Blessed Virgin, Saint Joseph, Blessed De La Salle, the Angel Guardians to..*"

This same letter of Brother Alpert contains the following quite astonishing assertion:

"*This prayer, born with the Institute and attributed to M. Nyel, should be recited by the teacher when he enters the classroom.*"

The General Chapter did not follow up Brother Alpert's suggestion.

On the 5th June 1911, Brother Odobert-Joseph (District of Lyons) wrote to Brother Assistant Pamphile, taking up once again the suggestions of Brother Alpert, and proposing the ending of the prayer as follows:

"*I beseech the Most Blessed Virgin with Saint Joseph, the Angels Guardian, Saint John Baptist de La Salle and all the saints to protect me..*"

We do not know what the Brother Assistant replied.

The 1877 edition of the *Manuel de Piété* contains this prayer for the first time. In the 1899 edition, the word "especially" in the petition. "*Give me especially..a holy fear of you*" was omitted because it was thought to smack of Jansenism."

4. Subsequent history

The remaining history may be summarised in the following steps:

i. In 1917, when Brother Imier of Jesus as Superior General, applied to Rome to have an indulgence accorded for the recitation of this prayer, the suggestions of Brothers Alpert and Odobert were accepted and the form of the prayer which we know was approved;

ii. It seems that the official request [*supplique*] to Rome had not been well understood and a plenary indulgence was

wrongly (!) accorded to those Brothers who recited it every day for a month;

iii. This matter was rectified and the text modified to "*It is you who make the hearts of the children submissive to me*" because, as Brother Louis de Poissy remarked:"

"*The older wording suggested external discipline whereas the new wording envisages Christian submission.*"

Curiously, the note reminds us that this prayer was never envisaged as a prayer recited together by all the Brothers of the community but rather one "*to be recited individually before going to class.*" Brothers of a certain age may well remember it, however, as a community prayer to be recited before morning classes after the Offerings to the Divine Child, the *Pater Aeterna*.

5. An observation on the translation

The French, Spanish and Italian versions all use the translation of "*C'est vous qui me soumettez le coeur des enfants que vous avez confiés à mes soins*" [literally = It is you who make submissive to me the hearts of the children confided to my care]. The most recent English version, done by Brother Edwin Bannon, avoids the difficulty of "submit" or "submissive" for English readers in the following way.

"*You guide me in what I have to say to my pupils, and you make them responsive to my words*"

which does put a much finer point on the original idea, perhaps reminding us more of the Lasallian "*touching hearts*" than the equally Lasallian "*pupils entrusted to me !*"

Finally, for those who may not have come across Brother Edwin's fine translation, here it is:

Lord, you are my patience, my strength,
my light and my counsel. You guide me
in what I have to say to my pupils, and
you make them responsive to my words.

Be with them and with me at all times.

Give me for their sake a share in the
gifts of your Holy Spirit: wisdom,
understanding, counsel, courage,
knowledge, filial devotion to you and
a fear of displeasing you.

Increase my faith and give me zeal
to build your kingdom.

Accept my work as the continuation of
your divine Son's earthly ministry.

I ask this in His name. Amen.

Mary, Mother of Good Counsel, pray for us.
St. Joseph, protector of the Child Jesus,
pray for us.
Guardian Angels, keep my pupils from
dangers to soul and body.
St. John Baptist de La Salle, Patron
of Teachers, pray for us. •