

✧ *Companions for the Journey* ✧

**Praying with
John Baptist de La Salle**

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**Praying with
John Baptist de La Salle**

by
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Saint Mary's Press®

✧ *To my Brothers* ✧

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✧ Contents ✧

Foreword	7
Introduction	13
Meditations	
1. The Spirit of Faith	27
2. The Rule of the Scriptures	32
3. Living in God's Presence	36
4. Trusting in Providence	42
5. Discerning in All Things the Will of God	48
6. Praying Always	53
7. Owing Only Love	60
8. Creating Community	66
9. Embracing the Poor	71
10. The Body of Christ	76
11. Many Ministries, the Same Spirit	82
12. The Person of the Teacher	87
13. The Manner of Christian Teaching	93
14. Perseverance	98
15. Zeal	102
For Further Reading	108

✧ Foreword ✧

Companions for the Journey

Just as food is required for human life, so are companions. Indeed, the word *companions* comes from two Latin words: *com*, meaning “with,” and *panis*, meaning “bread.” Companions nourish our heart, mind, soul, and body. They are also the people with whom we can celebrate the sharing of bread.

Perhaps the most touching stories in the Bible are about companionship: the Last Supper, the wedding feast at Cana, the sharing of the loaves and the fishes, and Jesus’ breaking of bread with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Each incident of companionship with Jesus revealed more about his mercy, love, wisdom, suffering, and hope. When Jesus went to pray in the Garden of Olives, he craved the companionship of the Apostles. They let him down. But God sent the Spirit to inflame the hearts of the Apostles, and they became faithful companions to Jesus and to each other.

Throughout history, other faithful companions have followed Jesus and the Apostles. These saints and mystics have also taken the journey from conversion, through suffering, to resurrection. Just as they were inspired by the holy people who went before them, so too may you take them as your companions as you walk on your spiritual journey.

The Companions for the Journey series is a response to the spiritual hunger of Christians. This series makes available the rich spiritual teachings of mystics and guides whose wisdom can help us on our pilgrimages. As you complete the last meditation in each volume, it is hoped that you will feel supported, challenged, and affirmed by a soul-companion on your spiritual journey.

The spiritual hunger that has emerged over the last twenty years is a great sign of renewal in Christian life. People fill retreat programs and workshops on topics in spirituality. The demand for spiritual directors exceeds the number available. Interest in the lives and writings of saints and mystics is increasing as people search for models of whole and holy Christian life.

Praying with De La Salle

Praying with John Baptist de La Salle is more than just a book about De La Salle's spirituality. This book seeks to engage you in praying in the way that De La Salle did about issues and themes that were central to his experience. Each meditation can enlighten your understanding of his spirituality and lead you to reflect on your own experience.

The goal of *Praying with John Baptist de La Salle* is that you will discover De La Salle's profound spirituality and integrate his spirit and wisdom into your relationship with God, with your brothers and sisters, and with your own heart and mind.

Suggestions for Praying with De La Salle

Meet John Baptist de La Salle, a courageous and fascinating companion for your pilgrimage, by reading the introduction to this book, which begins on page 13. It provides a brief biography of De La Salle and an outline of the major themes of his spirituality.

Once you meet De La Salle, you will be ready to pray with him and to encounter God, your sisters and brothers, and yourself in new and wonderful ways. To help your prayer, here are some suggestions that have been part of the tradition of Christian spirituality:

Create a sacred space. Jesus said, "When you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your [God] who is in that secret place, and your [God] who sees all that is done in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:6). Solitary prayer is best done in a place where you can have privacy and silence, both of which can be luxuries in the lives of busy people. If privacy and silence are not possible, create a quiet, safe

place within yourself, perhaps while riding to and from work, while sitting in line at the dentist's office, or while waiting for someone. Do the best you can, knowing that a loving God is present everywhere. Whether the meditations in this book are used for solitary prayer or with a group, try to create a prayerful mood with candles, meditative music, an open Bible, or a crucifix.

Open yourself to the power of prayer. Every human experience has a religious dimension. All of life is suffused with God's presence. So remind yourself that God is present as you begin your period of prayer. Do not worry about distractions. If something keeps intruding during your prayer, spend some time talking with God about it. Be flexible because God's Spirit blows where it will.

Prayer can open your mind and widen your vision. Be open to new ways of seeing God, people, and yourself. As you open yourself to the Spirit of God, different emotions are evoked, such as sadness from tender memories, or joy from a celebration recalled. Our emotions are messages from God that can tell us much about our spiritual quest. Also, prayer strengthens our will to act. Through prayer, God can touch our will and empower us to live according to what we know is true.

Finally, many of the meditations in this book will call you to employ your memories, your imagination, and the circumstances of your life as subjects for prayer. The great mystics and saints realized that they had to use all their resources to know God better. Indeed, God speaks to us continually and touches us constantly. We must learn to listen and feel with all the means that God gave us.

Come to prayer with an open mind, heart, and will.

Preview each meditation before beginning. Spend a few moments previewing the readings and especially the reflection activities. Several reflection activities are given in each meditation because different styles of prayer appeal to

different personalities or personal needs. **Note that each meditation has more reflection activities than can be done during one prayer period. Therefore, select only one or two reflection activities each time you use a meditation. Do not feel compelled to complete all of the reflection activities.**

Read meditatively. After you have placed yourself in God's presence, the meditations offer you a story about De La Salle and a reading from his writings. Take your time reading. If a particular phrase touches you, stay with it. Relish its feelings, meanings, and concerns.

Use the reflections. Following the readings is a short reflection in commentary form meant to give perspective to the readings. Then you will be offered several ways of meditating on the readings and the theme of the prayer. You may be familiar with the different methods of meditating, but in case you are not, they are described briefly here:

- ◆ *Repeated short prayer or mantra:* One means of focusing your prayer is to use a *mantra*, or prayer word. The mantra may be a single word or a short phrase taken from the readings or from the Scriptures. For example, a mantra for a meditation on faith might be "I go before you" or "trust." Repeated slowly in harmony with your breathing, the mantra helps you center your heart and mind on one action or attribute of God.
- ◆ *Lectio divina:* This type of meditation is "divine studying," a concentrated reflection on the word of God or the wisdom of a spiritual writer. Most often in *lectio divina*, you will be invited to read one of the passages several times and then concentrate on one or two sentences, pondering their meaning for you and their effect on you. *Lectio divina* commonly ends with formulation of a resolution.

- ◆ *Guided meditation:* In this type of meditation, our imagination helps us consider alternative actions and likely consequences. Our imagination helps us experience new ways of seeing God, our neighbors, ourselves, and nature. When Jesus told his followers parables and stories, he engaged their imagination. In this book, you will be invited to follow guided meditations.

One way of doing a guided meditation is to read the scene or story several times until you know the outline and can recall it when you enter into reflection. Or before your prayer time, you may wish to record the meditation on a tape recorder. If so, remember to allow pauses for reflection between phrases and to speak with a slow, peaceful pace and tone. Then during prayer, when you have finished the readings and the reflection commentary, you can turn on your recording of the meditation and be led through it. If you find your own voice too distracting, ask a friend to make the tape for you.

- ◆ *Examen of consciousness:* The reflections often will ask you to examine how God has been speaking to you in your past and present experience—in other words, the reflections will ask you to examine your awareness of God’s presence in your life.
- ◆ *Journal writing:* Writing is a process of discovery. If you write for any length of time, stating honestly what is on your mind and in your heart, you will unearth much about who you are, how you stand with your God, what deep longings reside in your soul, and more. In some reflections, you will be asked to write a dialog with Jesus or someone else. If you have never used writing as a means of meditation, try it. Reserve a special notebook for your journal writing. If desired, you can go back to your entries at a future time for an examen of consciousness.
- ◆ *Action:* Occasionally, a reflection will suggest singing a favorite hymn, going out for a walk, or undertaking some other physical activity. Actions can be meaningful forms of prayer.

Using the Meditations for Group Prayer

If you wish to use the meditations for community prayer, these suggestions may help:

- ◆ Read the theme to the group. Call the community into the presence of God, using the short opening prayer. Invite one or two participants to read one or both of the readings. If you use both readings, observe the pause between them.
- ◆ The reflection commentary may be used as a reading, or it can be deleted, depending on the needs and interests of the group.
- ◆ Select one of the reflection activities for your group. Allow sufficient time for your group to reflect, to do a centering prayer or mantra, to accomplish a studying prayer (*lectio divina*), or to finish an examen of consciousness. Depending on the group and the amount of available time, you may want to invite the participants to share their reflections, responses, or petitions with the group.
- ◆ Reading the passage from the Scriptures may serve as a summary of the meditation.
- ◆ If a formulated prayer or a psalm is given as a closing, it may be recited by the entire group. Or you may ask participants to offer their own prayers for the closing.

Now you are ready to begin praying with John Baptist de La Salle, a faithful and caring companion on this stage of your spiritual journey. De La Salle has inspired many people to seek a closer relationship with God. It is hoped that you will find him to be a true soul-companion.

✧ Introduction ✧

De La Salle: Led by the Spirit

John Baptist de La Salle never inspired the popular devotion that people show toward Francis of Assisi, Thérèse de Lisieux, or Anthony of Padua. His name may be recognized only by people who attended a school staffed by the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

True, De La Salle founded a major religious congregation. He was proclaimed the patron of teachers by Pope Pius XII. He systematized and made practical many of the educational methods considered standard practice today, such as teaching an entire group of pupils simultaneously and giving regular, individual reports about students' progress. He started a teacher training center, uncommon in his time. But few Christians know anything about him.

Why should twentieth-century Christians be interested in or inspired by De La Salle's spirituality? Like most of us, De La Salle experienced no blinding visions or voices out of the thunder telling him what God wanted him to do. Instead, like us, he listened to people, saw needs, felt compassion, and prayed for God's spirit.

French society disdained teaching in charity schools as a work fit only for those who could do nothing better. Despite strenuous objections from his relatives and friends, De La Salle, who was a member of a distinguished family, not only formed a community of teachers to serve poor people but gave away his wealth and position to live like them.

In short, De La Salle held firmly to his beliefs. Holding fast to his course in life often demanded heroic faith and courage. At the same time, De La Salle showed that following

the way of the Gospels in ordinary tasks, no matter how humble, can lead to holiness and the touch of God's love. For De La Salle, spirituality and day-to-day decisions about practical matters could not be separated. When he told his Brothers how to teach writing to the children, he was telling them how to love the children. When done in the spirit of faith—that is, seeing each child as sacred to God—every act of service becomes a prayer. Thus, De La Salle's spirituality is for the workplace and the home, the classroom and the streets.

De La Salle's Early Years

John Baptist de La Salle was born in 1651, early in the reign of the Sun King, Louis XIV, and in the middle of *Le Grand Siecle*, the century many consider a high point of French culture. He was the eldest of eleven children, of whom seven survived.

Born into a wealthy family of Reims, De La Salle might have eventually moved among the rich and famous of France. Like most children of well-to-do parents, he received tutoring at home until he reached nine years of age. From then until he was eighteen, he studied at the Collège des Bon-Enfants. The school's classical curriculum included grammar and syntax, Latin, Greek, and philosophy.

At age eleven, De La Salle took the first steps toward priesthood by receiving the tonsure, which meant that a patch of hair at the top of his head was shaved. At fifteen, he inherited a canonry at the cathedral of Reims. Becoming a cathedral canon was an honor and provided additional income to De La Salle's family. The canons prayed the Divine Office together daily in the cathedral, participated in the major liturgical feasts, and advised the archbishop. In 1670, De La Salle entered the major seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris. Here he learned a method of meditative prayer that he would later adapt for his Brothers. As part of the seminary routine on Sundays, he taught religion to children in the parish, which served the most crime-ridden section of Paris.

The course of De La Salle's life changed in 1671 when both of his parents died. Suddenly De La Salle had charge of the family estate and his younger brothers and sisters.

Beginning His Mission

Realizing that he needed a spiritual guide, De La Salle chose Nicolas Roland, a fellow canon at Reims. Unknown to both men, this relationship would lead De La Salle to assume his life's mission.

Roland encouraged De La Salle to finish his studies for the priesthood. At the age of twenty-seven, De La Salle was ordained. Two weeks later, Roland died, having named De La Salle as the executor of his will and protector of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, who were formed to educate poor girls. De La Salle helped the Sisters obtain *letters patent*, or legal status, and continued to say Mass for them and see to their spiritual needs.

One day, as De La Salle was coming to visit the Sisters, he met Adrien Nyel. Nyel was a layman who had come to Reims to establish a charity school for boys at the behest of Mme Jeanne Dubois Maillefer, who was connected by marriage to the De La Salle family. During the chance meeting, Nyel explained his intentions to De La Salle. Offering to help Nyel make the necessary contacts, De La Salle suggested that Nyel stay at his house.

One pastor agreed to establish a charity school for boys in his parish; thus, in April 1679, the first school opened its doors. Soon another donor wished to open a school on the other side of Reims; Nyel obliged. The quarters provided by the parish for Nyel and the other teachers became inadequate. Out of his own pocket, De La Salle rented a house near his own for the teachers. Shortly, Nyel opened a third school in Reims.

Despite the success of the schools, problems arose. The supervision of the schools demanded more attention than Nyel could give. The teachers were young, untrained, and in need of clear direction. The classrooms bulged with boys.

Sizing up the situation, De La Salle decided to invite the teachers into his home for their meals. In this way, he could work with them and, he hoped, improve their skills and motivation as teachers.

His plan worked. The teachers improved and so did order in the schools. Even so, De La Salle was in a quandary. On one hand, he wanted the charity schools to fulfill their mission, but their success would depend on the steady growth of competence among the teachers, a growth largely dependent on his involvement with them. On the other hand, he was not certain how involved he should become with the charity schools and the teachers.

De La Salle sought the advice of Father Nicolas Barré, who had worked to set up schools for poor children in Rouen and Paris. Barré's advice distressed De La Salle. In effect, he suggested that De La Salle live with the schoolmasters.

One contemporary of De La Salle's described those who taught school as "gamblers, drunkards, libertines, ignorant, and brutal." Later in his life, De La Salle admitted, "Those whom I was at first obliged to employ as teachers, I ranked below my own valet, hence the very thought of having to live with them was unbearable" (W. J. Battersby, *St. John Baptist de La Salle*, pp. 41, 71). Nevertheless, De La Salle decided to move the schoolmasters into his own home.

Anger, disbelief, and accusations of madness greeted De La Salle's actions. Relatives removed his younger brothers from his care. De La Salle persevered, believing that providing disciplined, competent teachers was a task given to him by God.

Under De La Salle's tutelage, the teachers increased in competence. Requests came to open other charity schools for boys. Nevertheless, the masters began to grumble about the insecurity and the hard life of religious discipline. De La Salle urged them to rely on Providence, but they reminded him that he did not have to worry if the schools failed because he was independently wealthy.

Once again, De La Salle prayed over the matter and turned to Father Barré for advice. Barré suggested that if De La Salle wanted the charity schools to prosper, he should renounce his canonry and distribute his money to poor people. If God wanted the charity schools established, God would see

to it. This radical recommendation was countered by many other voices, but after a long period of prayer, De La Salle resigned his canonry and gave away his wealth to the victims of a famine raging through France. He became as poor and reliant on God's providence as the schoolmasters.

Forming the Community

De La Salle implemented the most useful methods of instruction in the schools and negotiated to open new charity schools. He also began forming the teachers into a religious community. They followed a schedule that included specific times for prayer, meals, and work. Not all of the men were willing to commit themselves to such a lifestyle; some left, a small group stayed.

De La Salle was now totally committed to the community of teachers. To establish their unique identity as laymen dedicated to charity schools, they decided to wear a simple black robe, thick-soled shoes like those worn by peasants, a tri-cornered hat, and a short mantle or cape. This drab habit distinguished them from clerics and indicated the beginning of a new type of community. It was also practical and fitting for men working with poor children. For instance, the Brothers' mantle was short because, as De La Salle said, "It has been noticed that with [a long mantle] there is a danger of knocking over most of the small children on either side while trying to place them in order" (W. J. Battersby, ed., *De La Salle: Letters and Documents*, p. 257).

Much of De La Salle's zeal for the Christian education of poor children came from his conviction that with an education, people could establish a lifestyle free from hunger and poverty. Poor people in France were oppressed, the victims of a monarchical system that kept every citizen in his or her place on the social ladder. The cheap labor of the peasants and workers supported the extravagant way of life of the aristocracy. In providing a Christian education to poor children, De La Salle helped them both learn their religion and improve their lot in life.

Gradually, somewhat better educated men started asking to be trained as Brothers. De La Salle established a formation

program for them. He also created a teacher training school for men who would run schools in rural areas. Even so, the community had no legal standing in France or status within the church.

In 1686, De La Salle persuaded an assembly of Brothers to choose one of their own to be the superior. Reluctantly, they did so. Concerned that a priest should have a Brother as his superior, the archbishop demanded that De La Salle resume direction of the community. This incident points to two important characteristics of De La Salle: his detachment from power and his desire to develop leadership among the Brothers to ensure continuity of direction in the community.

Establishing Schools in Paris

De La Salle then accepted an invitation from the pastor of Saint Sulpice in Paris to take over the charity school there. He knew that if the work he had started was to gain a firm foothold, the Brothers had to become established in France's capital city. So, in 1688, De La Salle set out with two Brothers for Paris.

The school on rue Princesse contained two hundred students from the surrounding slums. In a short time, the Brothers had grouped the boys by age and imposed order and a daily schedule. As was often the case, the priest who had been running the school became jealous of De La Salle's progress and started a rumor campaign against him. Nevertheless, the school thrived, and the Brothers assumed direction of other schools in the parish.

Practical man that he was, De La Salle studied the most effective ways to educate poor children. Eventually, the collected wisdom from these early years in the schools was published in a manual of instructions for teachers titled *The Conduct of the Schools*. This book gave specific guidelines on such topics as "What Is Done During Breakfast and Lunch," "Method of Reading the Chart of Syllables," "Method of Training to Write Well," and "Daily Prayers That Are Said in School." Permeating the methods described are ways of integrating the teaching of the Gospels into all aspects of school life.

✧ Meditation 1 ✧

The Spirit of Faith

Theme: Central to Lasallian spirituality is the spirit of faith. De La Salle realized that unless people are animated and guided by a firm belief in the Good News of Jesus Christ, they will wander away from goodness, wisdom, and charity.

Opening prayer: Merciful God, grant me an increase in faith so that I may have hope and love in abundance.

About De La Salle

Many of the difficulties that beset De La Salle were outlined in the introduction to this book. Recall that the Little Schools and the Writing Masters sued him and forced the closure of the schools for a period. Several clerics tried to destroy his reputation and to undermine his leadership. Poverty, hard work, and illness sapped his energies. However,

throughout all of these difficulties De La Salle retained his characteristic calm, remained in the background as much as possible, and went about his business as usual. With his equally characteristic tenacity, he never surrendered any of the principles that he considered essential to the Brothers and the Christian Schools. . . .

The secret of De La Salle's imperturbable confidence and calm in the face of opposition and defeat lay in his

deep religious faith, the “spirit of faith,” as he called it, that he left as a legacy to his Institute. (Luke Salm, *The Work Is Yours*, p. 125)

An example of what the spirit of faith meant to De La Salle can be seen in a resolution he made for himself while on retreat:

I shall always consider the establishment and the direction of our community as the work of God. That is why I have entrusted it to his care, in such a way that as far as I am concerned, I shall do nothing that concerns the Institute except by his orders. For that reason I shall always consult extensively concerning what I ought to do. I will often speak to God in the words of the prophet Habacuc: *Domine opus tuum*. [Lord, the work is yours.] (Salm, *The Work Is Yours*, p. 126)

Pause: Reflect on how the spirit of faith lives in you, especially in times of difficulty.

De La Salle’s Words

Faith should be the light and guide of every Christian, to lead and direct him in the way of salvation. . . .

The spirit of our Institute is therefore first, a spirit of faith. . . .

. . . The Brothers of the Society shall animate all their actions with sentiments of faith; and they shall always have in view the orders and the will of God, which they shall adore in all things, and by which they shall be careful to regulate their conduct. (*A Collection of Various Short Treatises*, pp. 57–59)

The spirit of faith is a sharing in the Spirit of God who dwells in us, which leads us to regulate our conduct in all things by the sentiments and truths that faith teaches us. You should, therefore, be wholly occupied in acquiring it, so that it may be for you a shield against the fiery darts of the devil. (*The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle*, p. 217)

Reflection

Love stands as the central norm for Christian living, but De La Salle recognized that love cannot be nurtured without faith. A Brother in a room crowded with poor boys would not last long if he did not believe that he was serving God and that his efforts would ultimately bear fruit. Faith lets us believe in the unseen God and the unseen benefits of our labor.

De La Salle also realized that faith not only motivates us to do good but also instructs us in how to act. Faith could draw a Brother to teach each day, but the Brother must teach as Jesus did or in the manner that faith in Jesus would indicate. Seeing all things through the eyes of faith required the study of the Scriptures and constant prayer.

✧ Forgetting the role that faith plays in our day-to-day activities or in our relationships is easy. To reappropriate your acts of faith, sit quietly. Remind yourself that God is with you. Meditate on each of these questions and record your responses, perhaps in your journal or on a separate sheet of paper:

- ◆ What actions have I taken today that depend on my faith in the unseen good that will come from those actions?
- ◆ What relationships of mine are sustained by my faith in the other person?
- ◆ Who believes in me?

✧ Select one line from “About De La Salle” or “De La Salle’s Words” and pray it slowly and repeatedly. Let the meaning and the feelings of the line sink in.

✧ Look ahead to tomorrow’s work and to the interactions you will have with other people. List five activities you will do and five people with whom you will be involved. Next to each activity and name, describe how you should act if you are motivated by the spirit of faith.

✧ Pray a litany for an increase in faith, naming specific ways in which you want to grow; for example, “When I become skeptical about the goodness of people, give me faith,” or “When I have doubts about Jesus’ message of love, give me faith,” or “When I become discouraged in the face of difficulties, give me faith.”



God's Word

Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of realities that are unseen. It is for their faith that our ancestors are acknowledged.

It is by faith that we understand that the ages were created by a word from God, so that from the invisible the visible world came to be. . . .

It was by faith that Abraham obeyed the call to set out for a country that was the inheritance given to him and his descendants. . . .

It was equally by faith that Sarah, in spite of being past the age, was made able to conceive. . . .

It was through faith that the walls of Jericho fell down when the people had marched round them for seven days. It was by faith that Rahab the prostitute welcomed the spies [of Israel] and so was not killed with the unbelievers. . . .

. . . Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection: for the sake of the joy which lay ahead of him, he endured the cross, disregarding the shame of it, and has taken his seat at the right of God's throne. Think of the way he persevered against such opposition from sinners and then you will not lose heart and come to grief. (Hebrews 11:1—12:3)

Closing prayer: "My God, I offer you all my thoughts, words, and actions of this day, that they may be wholly consecrated to you and that they may procure for me your holy love, which is all I desire. I offer you the new life, which you have given me by waking me from sleep. Let it, I ask you, be to me a life of grace so that I may henceforth be able to say that it is no longer I who live, but that it is Jesus Christ who lives in me." (Adapted from John Baptist de La Salle, *Manual of Piety*, p. 4)