

JESUS IN LASALLIAN HEARTS

For more than three centuries now it has been the custom of the De La Salle Christian Brothers, whether in the community or in the school, to conclude every prayer session with the expression “Live Jesus in our hearts forever!” In today’s world, the Lasallian mission, along with the spirituality that drives the mission, has been undertaken by associates and partners. They too have become accustomed to ending prayer in the classroom and at gatherings or solemn assemblies with the same invocation. Just as the recollection of the presence of God begins Lasallian prayer, so too the expectation that Jesus will live in Lasallian hearts brings prayer to an end.

This prayer comes directly from St. John Baptist de La Salle. It is found in the earliest versions of the Rule composed for the Brothers by their Founder, going back to the daily regulations decided on in the first assembly of the principal Brothers in 1686. Strangely enough, it appears in the first instance, not as a concluding prayer, but as the first prayer of the Brothers on arising in the morning. In Chapter 27 of the primitive Rule, it is prescribed that the Brother appointed should ring the rising bell at 4:30 AM and then say in a loud voice “Live Jesus in our hearts!” to which the Brothers would respond “Forever!” The text then goes on to say “This is the signal of the community.” The same chapter indicates that “Live Jesus ...” should be used to conclude the period of morning meditative prayer. In time it became a way of terminating all the community prayer sessions, and even the recreations, during the course of the day.

It is interesting that in the prayers that the Founder prescribed for use in the schools “Live Jesus ...” does not appear. That was intended as a “signal” or sign of identity for the community, i.e. the Society, the Institute of the Brothers. But little by little, the Brothers began to use it in the schools as a way of ending the scheduled prayers. Just as “Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God,” originally used only in the school prayers, found its way into the community, so “Live Jesus in our hearts!” migrated from the community to the schools.

The invocation “Live Jesus in our hearts” was not, however, original with De La Salle. It is found in a variety of forms in many of the French spiritual writers of the 17th century. St. Francis de Sales (d.1622), for example, writes in his *Introduction to the Devout Life* “Live, Jesus! Live, Jesus! Yes, Lord Jesus, live and reign in our hearts forever and ever. Amen.” And again, in his *Treatise on the Love of God* “Live, Jesus! Jesus, I love! Live, Jesus whom I love!” Similar sentiments can be found in other writers of the French school of spirituality, as it came to be known. Saint John Eudes (d. 1680) developed a theological spirituality, sometimes called a “heart-spirituality,” based on the love of God as exemplified in the heart of God, the heart of Jesus, and the heart of Mary and so implanted in our hearts.

Cardinal Berulle (d.1629) is usually considered the founder of the French school as it came to be known. He was a major influence on John Jacques Olier (d.1657), who founded the Seminary of St. Sulpice in Paris. The young John Baptist de La Salle was formed in the same spiritual tradition as a seminarian at St. Sulpice from October 1670 until April 1672 when the death of his father forced his return to Reims. The spiritual writings and prayers that De La Salle later on composed for the Brothers and for the schools are very much influenced by Olier and the dominant spirituality at St. Sulpice

Very briefly, 17th French spirituality is primarily a Christological spirituality focused on the man Jesus in whom the Word of God became human, the mystery of the Incarnation. For

these authors, the mystery of the Incarnation continues to be lived out in the life of the Christian. The goal of Christian spirituality, then, is to identify with Jesus living within us, not only by imitating his way of life but, more deeply, by making one's own the mentality, the mind set, the "heart" of Jesus in the various events of his life, especially his self-surrender to the will of his heavenly Father. A key text, expressive of this attitude of total self-effacement, is the kenotic hymn in the Epistle to the Philippians: "Let this mind be in you, which was in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave ..." (Phil. 2, 5-11).

The spiritual writers of the French school found abundant evidence in the New Testament that led them to contemplate and foster communion with Jesus living within us. Thus, Saint Paul to the Galatians: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives within me" (Gal. 2, 20), and to the Ephesians "I pray that ... Christ may dwell in you hearts through faith" (Eph. 3, 16-17). In his last discourse as recorded in John's Gospel Jesus says very pointedly "Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (Jn. 14, 19-20).

In his history of the French school of spirituality R. Denville credits John Baptist de La Salle, not only for the prayers and meditations that he composed in the spirit of Olier, but especially for giving to his Brothers "Live Jesus in our hearts Forever!" as the sign of their community. Denville sees in this short prayer a distillation of the essence of the Jesus-centered spirituality of the French school. Not every aspect of seventeenth century French spirituality is attractive to people today. Yet Lasallians have access to its most enduring insights, thanks to this brief and oft-repeated prayer provided by De La Salle. It has been on the lips of Lasallians now for over three-hundred years.

There are some practical problems, however, in the traditional use of this prayer. For one thing, it is so short that it is not conducive to extended reflection on the meaning of what it expresses. This is especially true since the formula usually comes at the end of a prayer session. It is a signal for Lasallians to turn to more immediate occupations and preoccupations, however apostolic they may be. And then, the frequent repetition of the prayer can become so routine as to reduce its content to meaninglessness. There is reason, then, to make this prayer the subject of a more penetrating analysis as well as more prolonged meditation of what we Lasallians are saying when we express the hope that Jesus will live in our hearts forever. What follows is an attempt to plumb the depths of the sentiment these words are intended to express.

Live. The verb is in an imperative or perhaps optative mood. As such it has an urgency about it. It is akin to the expression "come alive" as when we speak of something that has been dormant suddenly awakens and takes on new energy and vitality. To live, to have vitality, is a dynamic concept and is the very opposite of lethargy and death. Thus we speak of the life of the body, the life of the mind, the spiritual life, community life, or even the life of the Institute, the life of a school. Jesus has said "I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance" (Jn.10, 10). Jesus is not only the way and the truth; he is the life (Jn.14, 6), the life that gives meaning to life in all its other forms. In addition, the verb "to live" implies permanence. Living is not only a momentary thing, it is linked to continuity, as in "Where do you live?" John's Gospel tell us that the "Word became flesh and lived among us" (Jn. 1, 14). His living among us is no longer in his mortal flesh but continues in the communication of his Spirit that he has sent as grace to be living with us and in us always. Viva life!

Jesus. It is significant that our prayer refers to Jesus in this way. That is how he was

referred to in his lifetime; that was his name as he grew to human maturity, a created human being just as we are. It has become so common to attach the word “Christ” to the name Jesus that we forget that Christ is not his name but a title. Jesus became generally recognized as “the Christ” or Messiah only in the light of what the first of Christians came to believe about him after his resurrection. To say Jesus is the Christ is a statement of Christian faith, not his name in his earthly lifetime. He was not “Jesus Christ, son of Mr. and Mrs. Christ.”

To call him Jesus, then, is to invoke the reality of his full humanity which is the same as ours. Unlike the medieval theologians and the seventeenth century spiritual writers, theologians today do not presume that Jesus had access during his lifetime to all divine knowledge. He had to learn by experience as we do, he had to grow in wisdom, age, and grace and didn’t have it all at once. There were some things, like the timing of the day of judgment, that he did not know. When he was sad, he wept; when faced with disgrace and death, he flinched; when his disciples fled, he was disappointed; when the Romans scourged and him and nailed him to the cross, he felt intolerable pain; when he died, he felt abandoned.

There is more to Jesus than that, of course. Little by little it dawned on his human intelligence that the relationship between him and the God he called Father was something special and unique, that his humanity had been so graced with God’s self-communication in an unconditional and irrevocable way that his union with the divine could in later centuries be called hypostatic. Passing through death to resurrected life, Jesus, still human like us and united inseparably to divinity, entered a glorified existence freed from the limitations of time and space. His humanity, although not resuscitated to its historical state, was not destroyed in the process, merely transformed. As his first disciples, and then the communities they founded, accepted in faith what they could no longer see, they began to speak of Jesus as the Christ and Lord. They saw themselves as the body of Christ, the continuation of what God had begun in Jesus, that Jesus was the first born from the dead, that God’s self-communication in grace and glory was what God intended for everyone.

We Lasallians are often reminded that it is this Jesus who lives in our hearts. In the spirit of faith that De La Salle wanted to be the spirit of his Institute, we are caught up in faith into the mystery of the incarnation. This Jesus in our hearts is one with us in his humanity, one with God in his divinity. Lasallians have an answer to the question Jesus once put to the Apostle Peter: “But who do you say that I am?”

In our hearts. What a powerful symbol is the heart! It is used to refer to the seat of emotion, especially the emotion of love, that points beyond emotion to the full reality of self-giving love. The heart thus becomes the symbol of the self. When Jesus invites us to learn of him because he is meek and humble of heart, he is telling something about himself. Sometimes the heart is set in contrast to the head, as something warmer, more subjective, more personal, more than purely intellectual. Thus when we ask that Jesus live in our hearts we do more than say that we believe doctrines about Jesus. We take the person of Jesus into our very selves, into our subjectivity, into our hearts. As Christians we become so united to Jesus living within us that we become other Christs to those we serve.

As an expression of Lasallian spirituality, “Live Jesus ...” cannot reflect a spirituality divorced from community and from mission. It is significant that the prayer refers to Jesus living in **our hearts**. The life of Jesus within us is something we share in a Lasallian educational community. The warrant for this comes from the words of Jesus: “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18, 20). The presence of Jesus among

us gives life and motivation to our Lasallian association for the educational mission, which is the mission of Jesus himself, that “the poor have the Gospel preached to them.” It is with Jesus in our hearts that we become capable of “touching hearts,” as De La Salle so often urged his followers to do. One in Christ and in one another, “we are all in this together.”

Forever. This traditional conclusion to Lasallian prayer has advantages over a simple “Amen.” It must be granted that as a final prayer the Amen has a long tradition rooted in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, as well as in the tradition of the synagogue and the Christian churches. Nor is the Amen missing from many of the prayers offered in a Lasallian context. But as a parting sentiment, the Amen is altogether too final. It affirms with vigor what has gone before, but it does nothing to keep the sentiment of the prayer moving and pointing to what is to follow.

“Live Jesus ... Forever!” sends Lasallians away from formal prayer in the hope and belief that the presence of Jesus in their hearts is something that continues, that all else that comes from the heart, especially the sense of mission, is energized by the ongoing presence therein of the very self of Jesus. It provides a way of fulfilling the gospel mandate to “pray always,” that is, to make all that one does a prayer in union with the Jesus who was always at prayer.

What follows the prayer is usually either a session the classroom or else a formal gathering of some sort. In either case the “forever” assures us that Jesus stays with us even though our full attention now has to turn to the lesson to be taught, the presentation to be made, or the dialogue to be carried forward. Beyond our immediate concerns the prayer reminds us that we carry Jesus our hearts in whatever else we do, not only for the rest of the day, or the week, or the year, but on and on through a lifetime. That is what forever means.

Finally, “forever” in the context of the Lasallian prayer refers not only to endless time but to eternity. The day will come for each one of us when time will be no more, when “forever” will mean the liberation from the limits of time and space, the experience of absolute mystery as the self-communication of God in timeless glory. That is when the end product of the Lasallian mission, the ultimate salvation of those entrusted to our care, becomes a reality for them and for us who carry on that mission. Then the life of Jesus within us, “in our hearts,” will no longer be a matter of faith but of sight, of an experience so immediate and fulfilling that it has been called beatific. Beatification is the destiny for all of us when we experience what it means to have Jesus living in our hearts for all eternity. Forever!

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