



Lasallian Reflections

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Always on Holy Ground Remembering the Presence of God

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August 24, 1983. The principal stood up, called us to order, and invited us to begin the meeting with a prayer. Silence fell over the teachers and staff assembled in the library. "Let us remember," he intoned, "that we are in the holy presence of God." Then he paused for some time so we could accept the invitation to remember.

I found myself deeply moved - by the words, by the invitation, by the prayerful silence. And I began to reflect on his choice of words. Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.

He did not say, "Let us place ourselves in God's presence," as if we were not already in God's presence. He did not say, "Let us call upon God to be present to us in all we do this school year," as if to say that God is only present when invited. No, he did not say these things. He said, Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God. We are in the holy presence of God. Now, then, always. The challenge - invitation - was to remember this reality.

And, at that moment, I remem-

bered. And I've never forgotten that experience.

For St. John Baptist de La Salle, remembering the presence of God was absolutely essential if a Brother was to perform his educational duties well.

His writings are filled with exhortations to remember God's presence. In *The Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, he indicates that the recollection of the presence of God is the first step in preparation for prayer.



In a letter written to a Brother dated May 15, 1701, De La Salle says, "The remembrance of God's presence will be a great advantage in helping you and in inspiring you to do all your actions well." Upon entering their classroom, the Brother was instructed to kneel beside his desk, make the sign of the cross, and remember God's presence. Every half hour, a bell was rung in class and a student stood up at his desk and said, "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God." The message is clear: we are always standing

on holy ground.

Why this focus on the presence of God? What difference does it make anyway?

It has to do with finding what we are looking for. In his Meditation for the Feast of the Epiphany, he urges the Brothers to “recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children” entrusted to their care. See beneath the surface; look beyond the presentation. The “poor rags” of our students could be a disheveled appearance, misbehavior of some sort, an “attitude,” apathy, cynicism...you get the point.

If we look for trouble, we will find trouble. If we look for shortcomings, we will find shortcomings. If we look for promise, believing that a student has potential for success, we will find the key that will unlock that student's potential. We refuse to define the student by his or her behavior.

We believe there is more - all we have to do is to keep looking.

In an age in which so many young people struggle with the poverty of low self-esteem, one of the greatest gifts we can give our students is to see their goodness before they even see it in themselves, to name their goodness, and to love them so effectively that they begin to believe in their own goodness.

Remembering the presence of God

reminds us of the limitless goodness and potential in each person we encounter. It keeps us focused on the good. Every encounter with a student is an encounter with God.

The start of the academic year is a time for preparation. It is time to prepare our lessons, to outline our unit plans, to decorate our classrooms, to draw up seating charts.

Most importantly, it is a time to prepare our hearts to receive the students entrusted to our care. It is a time to set goals and to establish patterns of behavior that will carry us through the school year.

As time has passed since that day 20 years ago in the library, I have forgotten much of the content of the in-service session. But I have come to understand that my wise principal had delivered a powerful lesson in teaching: before all else - before planning any lessons, before correcting any exams, before establishing any guidelines for classroom conduct, remember the presence of God. If we fail to do this, we fail the students entrusted to our care. They deserve our reverence, our respect, our love, our concern.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning said it best: *“Earth's crammed with heaven.”*

Amen



For Your Reflection:

It is said that De La Salle encouraged his Brothers to remember the presence of God every time they walked through a doorway. Pay attention to the number of doorways you walk through in the next 24 hours, and you will understand De La Salle's point: we are always and everywhere in the presence of God. His suggestion illustrates one practical way that one could remember the presence of God. What can you do to regularly remember God's presence?