

La Mennais Studies

TREATY OF UNION (1819)

**a common discernment,
regardless of their differences**

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Each one of the La Mennais booklets has an introduction, usually short, providing a list of contents, links to previous works and indicating their place in the developing spirituality of Jean-Marie de La Mennais. The introduction to this present booklet will extend this further. It may even increase in depth to ensure a greater personal, community or congregational experience.

It is the first booklet La Mennais – Studies to be written in preparation for the unique event of the **bicentenary** of our foundation: two hundred years since the Brothers of Christian Instruction graced the Church and the world. It is a good round number and as such should be celebrated in a deserving way. The Superior General and his Council will be promoting meetings, planning sessions, seeking ideas and suggestions for proposals to be made across the whole Congregation to contribute to this celebration.

However, a real celebration must go beyond academic exercises, religious activities, commemorative speeches or publications (of which this is one)... The best way to celebrate this event will be to relive here and now the early principles, grasp the “mystical” aspects of the moment and respond to the call to become active participants in the recreation of our origins.

We borrow words used by a commentator in the context of inter-religious dialogue, the relationships between certain groups and their Founder. We apply these to our situation to assist us in living out today the realities of two centuries ago. *“One question that comes up immediately is to what extent can disciples experience the purity and intensity of old... The mystical instinct to consider is whether each believer can recreate the same experience as the Founder without any difference between them, given that the essentials go beyond time and individuals.”*

This is the general direction our booklet needs to take. The story of these dates is already strongly commented upon in several Mennaisian Studies and in some depth. We will use such history from time to time.

This does not mean considering the list of events as if thumbing through a photo album tracing the events in the life of a grandfather. It is more like introducing ourselves to the spiritual experiences of Jean-Marie de la Mennais and Gabriel Deshayes in a way that can assist us to better understand our own spiritual journey, the pilgrimage of God in our lives. We can make our Founders our research partners and companions leading to God who has already made our acquaintance.

This booklet is intended as a review of our lives using the thread of Jean-Marie and Gabriel, not simply in an anecdotal or chronological way but keeping close to their strengths. In order to discover that God too has led our own lives and has taught us because *"in spite of our failings we are still his people, we are the lambs led by his hand"*.¹

¹ St-Brieuc, 14th September 1815. Words of Jean-Marie taken from Psalm 99.

1- TWO MEN, A SINGLE DESTINY

Let us begin to develop the theme of this Booklet. We recall, but more than that, we associate ourselves with the experiences of these two men who, two hundred years ago made a significant mark on society and the Church of their day. But they continue to make this mark in our personal story and that of the congregation. It is impossible to understand ourselves without them. Our life would have a different horizon, very different, without the events of 1819 which would emerge decisively on 9th September, 1820.

In this Introduction, we have signalled that we are not pursuing a historical treatise, even though we make reference to leads for historical research in order to understand the biographical details of both Jean-Marie and Gabriel which led them to this momentous date of 6th June 1819.

Our hands in their hands, following their steps, let us live out this same story and undergo the same experiences, urged to come together for the renewal of the Congregation they so revered. Today, are we able to gather our hopes, and find in this date a source of fresh inspiration for the future?

1.1. A common destiny

Gabriel Deshayes, priest at Auray, gathered a group of young people from January 1816, in order to have teachers in the poorest villages of Brittany, with increasing success. Villages, such as Thézenay, Baud, Pordic, Limerzel, Malestroit, Ploermel... were already familiar with certain young people, living in presbyteries and wearing identifiable clothing, who were passionately engaged in the work of Christian education.

Jean-Marie recognised the same needs, but with a particular

emphasis that echoed the specific tone and colour of the “integrated” schools which were imbued with a Christian ethos, as opposed to the ordinary state schools. He knew how to work in harmony with Gabriel. We recall Jean-Marie insisting several times, with some force, for a Brother from Auray to be sent to Pordic, or three of Gabriel Deshayes’ Brothers going to Dinan after Jean-Marie’s repeated requests.

By June 1819 there was a sizeable group of Brothers from Auray and Jean-Marie had started his work of formation with three novices.

On 6th June 1819 Jean-Marie de la Mennais and Gabriel Deshayes met up and after 8 days spent together, in prayer and reflection, they signed the “**Treaty of Union**” by which they united their ideas and their human resources. In this way, they harmonised their efforts to “bring to the children of the working class, especially those in country places in Brittany, trained and holy teachers”.

This is how the Congregation of Mennaisian Brothers got off the ground. The signatures of these two men on this document thus ensured the unification of their dreams, their efforts and their faith, as well as bringing together a small handful of men to educate, support and accompany young people.... and to put trust in them.

Treaty of Union: the text

June 6th, 1819

God † Alone

In the name of the Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, we, Jean-Marie de la Mennais, Vicar general of Saint-Brieuc, and Gabriel Deshayes, Vicar general of Vannes and parish priest of Auray, inspired by the will to provide the children of the common people, especially those of rural Brittany, with teachers of solid piety, have resolved to establish provisionally at Saint-Brieuc and at Auray two Novitiates of young men who will

follow as much as possible the Rule of the Brothers of Christian Schools and use their teaching methods; but bearing in mind that this enterprise can grow and wax strong only with time and that either of us may die before it has become strong enough to be self-sustaining, we have agreed on the following:

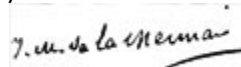
1. The two Novitiate houses of Saint-Brieuc and of Auray will be directed respectively by Father de la Mennais and Father Deshayes.
2. The two houses will follow the same Rule, the same teaching methods, and indeed will constitute a single house.
3. Each of us will direct and supervise all the Brothers placed in his diocese and those he will assign to other dioceses.
4. When we deem it opportune, we shall choose from among the Brothers a Superior and two Assistants and shall decide on their place of residence. If this has not yet been done at the death of one of us, or if for any reason one of us cannot participate, the choice and arrangements for the good of the society will be made by the other.
5. As soon as possible, we shall try to find a house which is centrally located for the two dioceses, not too far from a main road and preferably in a rural area.
6. Each of us will arrange that at his death all resources remaining for his house will pass to the survivor, who will put them together with his own for the support of the society.

Drafted in duplicate at Saint-Brieuc on Trinity Sunday, June 6, 1819.

Signed:



Vicar general and Parish-priest of Auray



Vicar general of Saint-Brieuc

The fact of uniting their joint efforts, sharing personal projects, here,

the “Treaty of Union”, can evoke different reactions. The authors themselves of this treaty had a different understanding of their experiences lived, worked upon and decided together.

Hence, Gabriel Deshayes confided in his coachman, Br. Jean, *“How happy and satisfied I am! I had some anxieties about the future of our young society, but I have just made arrangements with Father de la Mennais; things will go well, I am convinced of it; all my worries are gone.”* (Deo Soli, no. 1, p 31)

While Jean-Marie confirmed some years later, that it concerned an “object of monumental unreasonableness”, remarking that;

*“This charter, in effect, obliges each Brother to total obedience towards the Superiors, without even considering the possibility that orders given might be contradictory. The two Founders, however, always found themselves in agreement and loved each other; things worked out marvellously well.”*²

The text is very clear, written rapidly from the heart and not a legal document. But it conceals, in its deepest form, something difficult to understand, a miracle that all historians have been keen to underline, and this continues more than ever to point the way for us to always follow during these years of bicentenary celebrations. Two very different men undertake a common task. Their marked differences transformed themselves into a profound shared destiny.

Other congregations have experienced a similar mystery at their origins and as they engaged upon their institutional journeys.

Ignatius, Faber, Francis Xavier: their friendship not self-evident

Ignatius arrived in Paris on 2nd February 1528 with the intention of undertaking his studies at the Sorbonne. The following year, he changed address and joined two other

² Rulon. “Short history of the Brothers of Christian Instruction”, p. 29.

students, Peter Faber from Savoy and Francis Xavier from Navarre. At the time, Ignatius was 38 yrs. old and Peter Faber and Francis were both 23. They would stay together until 1535, some six years.

What did these three have in common at the outset? Nothing, absolutely nothing. Normally, one would expect their relationship to deteriorate after a little while. Such was not the case and we must ask why.

Ignatius and Xavier came from noble backgrounds but were politically opposed. It is worth noting that the gunshot that wounded Ignatius in defence of Pamplona might well have been fired by Xavier's brother who fought with the opposing army. On the other hand, Faber's Savoy was not on good terms with Spain.

If the political stances of the three were clearly different, their temperaments were no less different... Xavier was an athlete, a gifted and ambitious young man aspiring to a high position in Pamplona. "Very determined in all his undertakings", Simo Rodrigues, another companion, said about him. Faber, on the other hand, was a kind individual, very gifted in making friends, but very indecisive and scrupulous. Ignatius, for his part, arrived in Paris with his health at risk, but was determined and decisive in giving himself to God by helping others.

What, therefore, was the secret of their journey, given the diversity of their human characteristics, that enabled them to become such affectionate friends whose impact on the Church and the world would prove to be so great? How was it that being so different as persons and in their thinking, they finished up with the same ambitions? A friendship that was so unexpected could not have developed by chance. Something deeper must have caused it.

I believe a first explanation may be found in a letter written by Ignatius, while in Venice, to a Catalan priest, Jean de Verdolay on 24th July 1537, with the hidden intention of inciting the desire to join his team. Among other things he wrote, "Nine of my friends in the Lord have arrived here from Paris since mid-January, all graduates in the Arts and in Theology. Four are Spanish, two come from France, two from Savoy and one from Portugal."

This phrase "friends in the Lord" contains, in my view, the first inkling of a friendship not simply in human terms but

also spiritual and apostolic; more precisely, the type of friendship we need so much today in our consecrated lives.

1.2. Two very different men

What comes to mind immediately, thinking of Gabriel and Jean-Marie, are their physical differences, their birth circumstances, their family background and culture as well as different points of view and assessments of the future.

To sum up our approach here, we will focus on the historical events relating to Gabriel Deshayes as we would expect to have a better knowledge of those relating to Jean-Marie.

Deshayes is tall, vigorous, decisive. At the same time, his eyes and smile reveal a calm, childlike interior. *"1.76m tall, dark hair, black eyebrows, open forehead, blue eyes with a hint of brown"*³. Jean Marie is totally different, smaller, a larger head with a fixed and penetrating look. His face indicates he is a sensible administrator, while the corner of his lips show a tendency towards childlike tenderness and concentration.

Gabriel came from inland, born at Beignon, in the heart of Brittany on 6th December 1767, a place where the people spend their time in the fields rearing cattle and calves. He never knew the enchantment, the dreams, the projects associated with the sea, unlike Jean-Marie who was born in the beautifully natural environment of St Malo, cut out of granite, open to all winds and seas.

Jean-Marie knew five different homes owned by his family. As a child he lived in the "hotel" in St Vincent Street where he was born. He spent many years in the house known as Amelia which overlooked the Rance estuary. Throughout his youth, he also profited from time spent at La Chesnaie, another quiet and picturesque corner where he could reflect.

Gabriel never had the pleasure of a small palace like this. He had a difficult childhood. He lived in a small country Breton house where they were used to hardship; a small sized single room which served as kitchen and dining area and living room for the whole family with an earthen floor. The smell of smoke permeated the house and smoke stained the whole interior. There were small areas for laundry and food and cider storage. Above the chimney there was storage space for grain, vegetables

³ These are facts given on his passport, given by the prefect of Bouches-du-Rhone in 1825.

and potatoes. On the left there was a small lean-to which served both as a stable for animals and as storage for straw and hay.

Gabriel was unable to access the magical world of books. Like most children of his time, his schooling was short. The sheep needed looking after and the fields had to be managed. He would have one advantage over Jean-Marie – his knowledge of the earth, of fallow soil and straight furrows. Such was the down-to-earth reality of his life.

While Jean-Marie's family's business shipped wheat, flax and all other such merchandise around Europe, Michel Deshayes, Gabriel's father, was "a labourer and butcher as well; a 'country butcher' as they were called by the locals, who went from farm to farm killing pigs and overseeing cutting them up."⁴

It is certain that Jean-Marie did not attend the primary school run by the De La Salle Brothers who taught poorer children. However, in the middle-class tradition there would be a tutor or a teacher going from house to house to provide an education for children. Following the death of his mother, Jean-Marie's education was entrusted to Father Carré. At the same age Gabriel was already working for his family. He watched over the flock. He carried a crook and a small sack in which he kept his daily lunch. He kept both of these items all his life.

And, despite these differences in background, this man would strike up a truly loyal and fraternal friendship with Jean-Marie built on mutual trust.

Chance led them to frequent the same places at different times, without ever meeting, Gabriel being nearly thirteen years older than Jean-Marie. They covered the same ground, breathed the same air, heard the same callings, felt the same intuitions and impulses.

In 1782, Gabriel, aged 15yrs., joined St-Servan seminary, run by the Lazarists, in a building very close to the Amélia house which the young Jean sometimes visited.⁵

⁴ Louis Massé – 1991 Conference.

⁵ Historical references to St Servan include the following - "*The priests of this mission were expelled from Saint-Servan-sur-Mer in 1792, soon after the departure of the Bishop, Mgr. de Pressigny, who spent his last night in his country residence, near to the seminary.*" We would add that this was very close to the Amélia house. It was

In 1788, he found himself at the seminary in St. Méen, later to become the centre for the Congregation of the Priests of St Méen, directed by Jean-Marie.

When the Revolution broke out, Gabriel was on the threshold of ordination. In September 1790, he was ordained deacon. Then, under the pseudonym of "Grand Pierre", Gabriel Deshayes became involved in an active apostolate, risking, perhaps recklessly, his very life, as a courier between the priests faithful to Rome, carrying advice notes and papal briefs, thus weaving a pastoral cloth uniting workers and country people.

One day he reached St Malo, hoping to cross over to Jersey to finish his formation to the priesthood. On the same ramparts on which Jean-Marie used to play, or watch the sunlit horizon, or even observe people, looking out for nervous priests in disguise, Gabriel waited for the sound of a voice saying, "Who would like to embark?". The voice came one foggy, frosty day.

This was how he ended up sailing to Jersey where, on 4th March 1792, he was ordained as a priest by Mgr. Mintier, a Bishop in exile.

the night when Jean-Marie received, in the seminary, his First Communion and Confirmation.

2. THE ESSENTIAL BOND THAT ALLOWED THE TREATY OF UNION TO BE ACHIEVED.

We could insist even more on the differences that the human and spiritual traits of Jean-Marie and Gabriel Deshayes presented.

If we follow their biographies in parallel, there would appear to be no element, at first sight, that would point to any friendship, a convergence of ideas, or a mutual trust that was so evident from their first encounter. Regular face to face meetings continued up to the signing of the Treaty of Union.

Undoubtedly, each had heard about the other, possibly through news circulating in public. Gabriel must have heard of the young capitular vicar at the head of the diocese of St-Brieuc, a neighbouring diocese to his own. A young priest, who was a good administrator, excelling in the pressing task of healing the wounds of a suffering church.

Conversely, Jean-Marie must have heard the news of the mature priest of Auray, a popular missionary like himself, with an acute social concern, starting many projects to help his flock overcome hardships which he faced full on and for which he was prepared to take risks.

Jean-Marie would surely have come across the periodical "The Friend of Religion and the King"⁶, dated 1st June 1816, in which there was an extensive description of the work of the priest from Auray, as well as his other recently founded projects, including the foundation of a group of Christian teachers under the direction of the De La Salle Brothers.

⁶ Periodical started by Adrien Le Clère and Picot, in 1814. Féli de la Mennais and Frayssinous were the first contributors.

Nevertheless, up until 1817, they never had the awareness of a common divine inspiration in the form of a shared intuition or calling to a particular destiny.

The geography of Brittany, the limited means of communication and the respective pursuits of the two men made neither regular dialogue, nor shared discernment possible. St-Brieuc and Auray were 130 km. apart and the route was difficult and complicated.

▪ **Mission brings unity**

Gabriel and Jean-Marie: very different people, but closely linked by a common mission; following different paths to begin with, but arriving at the same destination.

By retracing the meetings they shared, the intensive rhythm of their apostolic itineraries, we can perhaps find the key to how these two contrasting people could achieve such a stable and solid communion.

We will have recourse to historical details.⁷ We will skim over events in order to reveal key facts, and inspiration for future initiatives.

▪ **An intuition**

We must consider the first meeting between the two founders as the moment when the essential bond that not even death could break.

Let us start with Gabriel Deshayes. In his pastoral work in Auray, his zeal for the education of children and young people was his driving force. After conversations with Sister Molé, Foundress of the Sisters of Charity of St Louis, he succeeded in setting up an organisation that would provide education for young girls. In the convent bearing the name “Eternal Father”, a free school for young girls from Auray would open in 1807.

For young boys, he thought that the De La Salle Brothers would be able to help, so he contacted their Superior General. His reply was pointed: *“You will have to wait a long time before we will be able to send*

⁷ Certain paragraphs relating to historical facts are taken directly from “*Jean-Marie de la Mennais – Pathfinder*” (Brother Josu Fernández Olabarrieta).

*any Brothers.”*⁸

But Father Deshayes was a determined individual, not given to discouragement. He kept a firm hope. In 1810. Br. Gerbaud was elected Superior General and two months after his election he gave in to the wishes of Gabriel by sending three Brothers: Géronce, Boniface and Matthew.

He solved the problem, “his” problem but an open wound remained across Brittany: villages where nobody goes, or where the constraints of the Brothers’ Rule would require a community of at least three members. To overcome this inconvenience, Gabriel Deshayes thought about preparing several young teachers who might go where the De La Salle Brothers could not go, to distant, small country villages that were nonetheless evangelical gems; the most deserted of Breton villages.

In his presbytery at Auray, he received a group of young people willing to start preparing this project. As time progressed, their number fluctuated, subject to comings and goings. We know the name of the first such young man who remained alongside him; Mathurin Provost.

The group consisted of a number of willing volunteers, perhaps ill prepared linguistically (some could not read, others not knowing a single word of French....), but very strong in faith and full of enthusiasm.

This project of Gabriel would enjoy some years later a favourable, detailed commentary in “The Friend of Religion and of the King”, June 1st, 1816.

If we now look at Jean-Marie, we see that as Vicar General of St-Brieuc, he was very concerned about the risks associated with the “new education” that the State was promoting in every part of the country. He spent time studying seriously their new methods and became strongly opposed to them.

At St-Brieuc, official notification was received of the imminent arrival of the Head of the new mutual school. Jean-Marie wanted to give him an immediate riposte by inviting the De La Salle Brothers and he obtained from the local Mayor’s office approval for financial credits in favour of his

⁸ Archives of the FEC, Rome, NC399 book No.2.

new school.

10th May 1817

Though the De La Salle Superior did not agree to his request, he did write to Father Deshayes asking him to take charge of the school with his young helpers. Gabriel, more inclined towards a peaceful, face to face conversation than written exchanges, came to St- Brieuc to meet the Vicar General, M. de La Mennais.

This was their first meeting. The two priests sensed that they shared the same passion, that they had the same preoccupations. They shared the same concerns and questions and felt driven to give identical replies.

While Gabriel felt he could not accept the proposal of Jean-Marie, a deep and fraternal communion of minds and hearts was born that very day.

Whilst still in the presence of Gabriel, that same day Jean-Marie, somewhat discouraged, wrote to the Superior General of the De La Salle Brothers, Br. Gerbaud;

*"I beg you most earnestly to grant our request; I would be inconsolable were you to refuse, for I foresee that sooner or later 'Lancastrian schools' will be established here and elsewhere. And then there would be no hope of having a Christian school in this city."*⁹ (Deo Soli No.1, p.19)

The letter contained several lines signed by Fr. Gabriel Deshayes due to his close relationship with De La Salle Brothers, having already obtained three Brothers at Auray.

"Father de La Mennais asks me to join in his request for Brothers for St-Brieuc and I do this with the greatest pleasure. You cannot find a more zealous and more respectable churchman, and I am sure that you will congratulate yourself for granting his request." (ibid, p.19)

The reply is very clear: *"I can send three brothers to St-Brieuc, as you request, but on condition that you send me three novices and that you pay their expenses in the Novitiate."* Jean-Marie received his three postulants and in return sent three young men from Gabriel Deshayes' group,

⁹ Letter to the Superior General FEC, 10th May 1816.

agreeing to pay their expenses.

With the help of the priest from Auray, he was able to resolve a particular problem, but other urgent needs arose each day, in one form or another. Imagination was required to find responses to the varied calls coming from somewhere or Someone.

The two Founders, united heart and soul, had together taken the first steps towards a joint mission and their shared apostolate. This mission showed them both, with ever growing force, what united them over and above any differences in age, culture and even religious sensibilities. They began to hear a voice which did not ask from where they came but where, in communion, they wanted to go.

▪ **A rapid journey**

From this very first meeting, frequent contacts and communications took place. These initially concerned the formation of the three novices found by Gabriel Deshayes and destined for the De La Salle Brothers, who were looked after by Jean-Marie. Other concerns were soon to follow.

The first months of 1818

Pordic is a small village in the diocese of St-Brieuc. Jean-Marie came there to preach a mission in January of that year. He noticed that the people were simple, poor, but well-disposed and generous. To support the work of evangelisation that he had begun and build a more solid foundation, he thought it best to open a school.

Pordic only needed one teacher. Jean-Marie could not turn to the De La Salle Brothers, since their rule required three Brothers to form a community. He went, therefore, to Father Deshayes who provided one teacher, Br. Paul. The school opened during the first months of 1818, not long after their first meeting.

November 1818

Dinan became the target of the liberals who wanted to open a Lancastrian school. During this month, Jean-Marie presented Fr. Deshayes' project (the "Institution of M. Deshayes) to the clergy of the town and offered to invite some of his teachers. The parish priest was against this for fear of breaking the law in the eyes of the Academy.

May 1819

Given that the opening of the mutual school was imminent, Jean-Marie went to Auray and was given three Brothers by Gabriel Deshayes.

Such occurrences were not frequent, but they were nonetheless signs of the profound communion that united the two men.

▪ **An inescapable destiny**

For some time, St-Brieuc had been experiencing conflict and tension between the school directed by the De La Salle Brothers and the mutual school, directed by M. Remond, trained in Paris. If the latter could count on official support, the former could rely on the local population. On 20th March, Mr Remond sent out a circular: *"Given that we have a model school, several teachers have come to learn how put our methods into practice in their respective townships, such that in a short while we will have several schools in the region."*

This latest development shed light on the necessary way ahead. That same day, Jean-Marie wrote to the parish priest at La-Roche-Derrien and asked him to find *"candidates for the new society of teachers he wanted to start as soon as possible"*.

The priest went to work and he came up with three subjects. One of them, the only one to persevere in this apostolate, was Yves le Fichant, aged just 18 years who would die at the age of 21 while at the secondary school (high school) in Guingamp. He was so small, quiet and fragile. Initially just a single, humble grain, enriched, however, by a silent, precious dew fall, strengthened by a deep assurance; we are in God's hands.

"I have started my project in my house at St-Brieuc with two young aspirants from Lower Brittany, who hardly spoke any French and did not know any more than myself what they would do. We knew only what we wanted, with God's help, which was to set up Christian schools in the country villages, though we feared that they would not succeed. Little by little the small mustard seed grew into a large tree, where so many children came for protection. A Domino factum est istud. (Such is God's

work.)”¹⁰

It was in this context that the “Treaty of Union” was written and signed on 6th June, two and a half months later. The framework for this could not be more significant.

Only two years had gone by, but so much had happened. Unforeseen collaborations saw the light of day, as if responding spontaneously to calls from within, rather than being formulated in structured long-term programmes or projects.

Everything was done in simplicity, focussing on what was essential, with singlemindedness and a shared outlook.

Later, Jean-Marie de la Mennais and Gabriel Deshayes joined up at St-Brieuc. They came together to open a school at Dinan which would start with four Brothers coming from Gabriel’s group, under the impetus of Jean-Marie. The situation was like a prototype for what was to come, a laboratory experiment leading to the meeting at the Eternal Father’s chapel at Auray a year later: four “Deshaysian” Brothers, four new Mennaisian novices, the two Founders.... and a feeling that the time to discern together God’s will in relation to their respective intuitions.

*“What a surprising meeting of two men so different socially and intellectually. One came from a modest country family. The other came from a wealthy background of traders and ship owners from St. Malo. One had completed his studies up to being a deacon. The second, from a solid, religious family, started, in 1802, teaching theology in the seminary of St. Malo and worked with his brother Félicité, writing and editing.”*¹¹ Such is the view of a biographer of Gabriel Deshayes.

Hence, after 8 days of prayer and reflection they signed the “Treaty of Union”.

It was a long and patient exercise, **discerning together** to find God’s will. Gabriel admitted as much when, the next day, on the way to Dinan, he confided in his novices André (Joseph Labousse), Charles and Gabriel: *“I am very pleased. Our Society is now well founded. Together with M. de*

¹⁰ To Fr. Boucarut, 12th January, 1844.

¹¹ Jean Chéory. “Gabriel Deshayes, Priest of Providence, 1767-1841”, p.123.

*la Mennais, I have made arrangements which will simplify everything.
Blessed be God."*

And at the core of this joint project, which goes way beyond any human friendship, is the **mission** which would keep them forever united. ***“We, Jean-Marie Robert de La Mennais.... and Gabriel Deshayes, filled with a desire to provide working class children with deeply religious teachers, we have resolved.....”***

3. TOWARDS A NEW “TREATY OF UNION”.

With dates arousing such fascination and passion, we might be tempted to underline the moment of our anniversary celebrations in 2019 with a new “Treaty of Union”. Such a project would add extra significance and meaning to the celebration.

But, we said in the preface to this booklet – allow me to repeat myself – *“The best way to celebrate this event will be to relive here and now the early principles, grasp the ‘mystical’ aspects of the moment and respond to the call to become active participants in the recreation of our origins.”*

In addition to any such initiatives that might be taken, we will, like Jean-Marie and Gabriel, undertake a novena of prayer and shared reflection (synod). We are aware that to arrive at June 6th, 1819 it took more than eight days of working together; it took years, a lifetime during which ideas matured, establishing the conditions in which their spirit of communion could be consecrated on that date.

If Gabriel and Jean-Marie succeeded in signing this document, over and above what has been said earlier, we can attribute this to the fact that in the depths of their being, there were common traits, essential characteristics which may not have been previously expressed, but which made possible their fraternal union. We must unearth these common roots which the two men shared and which facilitated their unity.

A new Treaty of Union should be possible, if we live out these characteristics “here and now”, in our own heart, in our communities, in the Congregation and in the Mennaisian Family.

We pointed out noticeable differences in the two Founders. It is obvious that there are great differences among us due to cultural differences of origin, formation, and religious sensibilities. However, communion is possible as long as we are imbued with the same spiritual principles that they shared.

3.1. The centrality of experiencing God.

Without a doubt, a deep spirit of co-operation was necessary between Jean-Marie and Gabriel. God was the focal point of their lives, even though they followed separate paths. Both their lives were filled with a profound awareness of the Mystery of God, the Absolute, so much so that all their thoughts, their wishes, their hopes had their origin and destiny in Him.

It suffices to look at how the start of the "Treaty of Union" - just underneath the day of signature - mentions two essential points: *"God † Alone"* and *"In the name of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit...."*

▪ God Alone

regarding the heading of this document, one could say that it related to a custom of the time, the frequent practice of quoting such short, spiritual aphorisms.

However, it reflected a much deeper reality which influenced the lives of both of them: the reality of God felt within them as their unique foundation, the only goal of their existence.

This expression originally came from Henry-Marie Boudon who wrote several works on this very theme. He it was who wrote the following phrase which we may see as specifically Mennaisian:

*"All their thoughts, as well as their desires, should have no other goal than God alone."*¹²

God † Alone is much more than a label. It is an experience of God communicated with urgency and passion in writings such as the following by Gabriel Deshayes which communicates a certainty, a conviction, a

¹² *"Spiritual works of Henry-Marie Bourdon... Dieu seul ou l'association de Dieu seul"*, p.178.

dynamism which was contagious:

“Seek, strive, desire to be esteemed, sought after, admired, consoled, favoured by GOD ALONE.”

“Pray so as to have no attachment to anything whatsoever, not even your confessor, but love only God, think only of Him, seek only to please God. Detach your heart from all creatures in order to give yourself entirely to God such that there is not the slightest thing which does not belong to your great God.”¹³

The fundamental principle, the basis on which to build one's existence is God Alone. For Jean-Marie, this is the foundation on which we can build our lives, providing the security that allows us to be audacious and take risks:

“All around us, nothing is stable, and we ourselves keep changing like the rest. In this way, we should not all lean on the poor man who is a prey to the most unseen events. Let us lean on God alone; let us stick to God alone; let us desire only the accomplishment of his always holy, just and merciful will.”¹⁴

This explains the origins of the expression God † Alone. But, we should also look at *“In the name of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit....”* which follows God † Alone in the title of the Treaty. Of course, many such documents begin with this phrase (for example, the text of the Brother's profession). But, it also expresses the conviction that everything finds meaning and substance, as long as we are rooted in the life of the Trinity. The whole of creation is invited into the circularity of giving and receiving, of welcoming and handing oneself over, the essence of Trinitarian living. By our very nature we take part in this dynamic movement, present since before the foundation of the world and giving meaning to our existence.

▪ A Foundational Experience

Very often, an ending has already been foreshadowed in a beginning,

¹³ *Letters and writings of Gabriel Deshayes*, p.45.

¹⁴ *“Sermons”*, VII, pp.2164-65. *“Anthology”*, p 40.

providing an anticipation of what is to come. We can all remember in our own lives the first inklings of God bursting into our lives and which gave us a “before” and “after”. Modern theology calls this divine intervention a “*foundational experience*”.

What were the foundational experiences in the lives of Jean-Marie and Gabriel, these experiences of God that touched their hearts and transformed their lives? Here are some examples of such experiences in the lives of well-known figures:

- o The enlightenment of St. Ignatius at the River Cardoner, after which all things seemed new and led him to feeling and thinking like a different person. (Autobiography, 30)
- o Blaise Pascal sewed on the back of his cloak, which he always wore, this inscription: “Year of grace 1654, (31 yrs old). Monday, November 23rd, feast of St Clement...From about 10.30pm until 12.30 ... Fire, joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.”
- o Paul Claudel had his experience during a Midnight Mass at Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris, at the age of eighteen.
- o So had the philosopher Manuel Garcia Morente, until then an agnostic.

With regards to Jean-Marie and Gabriel we have no exact dates for such experiences, but the results are just as tangible. How else could you understand their vocation choice in such dark times? What else could provide such a firm foundation to their very existence, enabling them to remain so strong and not give in to discouragement?

This was the environment in which Jean-Marie moved, without the uprightness, tenderness and dependability of his mother, without his father’s help, without the solid values of a systematic education... Perhaps he was guided by the female influence of his mother and aunt, however fleeting. The same was true of his faithfulness that came from above, a rock to cling to for all those who continued to promote life in a time of turmoil and struggle.

During the toughest years of the Terror, he would help establish an underground church in Saint-Malo and would learn to see new life where all was shadow, to sustain and support the lives of others, for example,

the priest ridiculously disguised as a sailor, his dying aunt taking her final steps towards eternal Life, and to cloak himself with that life which beckoned him on at every crossroads.

At the age of 20 years old, the age of decision making, when one must chart the course one will take in life, he would embark on a journey more risky than that of the corsairs:

"We are holding a celebration today that is very important to me: my father did not wish me to enter the priesthood: on St Francis Xavier's feast day in 1800, I visited him again and he gave me permission to receive the sub diaconate in Paris: I attributed this change - which was all the more unforeseen because of the difficult circumstances - and will continue to attribute it to the intercession of the apostle of the Indies..."¹⁵

His decision to be a priest was not a logical product of the threads that had been woven in his adolescence, but rather it seemed to go against the grain; it was born of an experience so rooted in his innermost being that nothing would make him change.¹⁶

What did Gabriel see, what was it that touched him so deeply during his adolescence and led to him following the vocation to become a priest during the most troubled times of the revolution? During his diaconate he endured a multitude of trials, and yet he persisted in his impetuous desire to become a priest.

And, once ordained in Jersey, he returned to France a week later to risk his life for the faith. What calibre of man was he, what fire was burning within for him to risk creating a clandestine church community served by a small group of thirteen priests who gave spiritual support to the members of the local Christian community who protected and sheltered them?

He knew that the authorities were watching him. The District Council of Ploërmel, on 20th July 1797, put him on the list of *"the greatest enemies of the State, who were trying to overthrow the best Constitution in the world"*. The name of Gabriel Deshayes was on this list *"deacon in*

¹⁵ *A Bruté de émur, 3 décembre 1809.*

¹⁶ Josu Fdez Olabarrieta. *"Jean-Marie de La Mennais, Pathfinder"*, p.36-37.

Beignon, priest in Jersey” and like the others, he should “be apprehended by the national police and other public forces to be led off as a disrupter of good order, to be detained in the citadel of Port-Louis.”

He would see one of his priest companions arrested and guillotined, some six days later, but he would remain unmoved, stirred by an interior fire that nothing would be able to extinguish. He would take on a thousand disguises to protect his ministry but he would remain open to keeping in touch with the One who put an indelible mark on his life.

Experiencing God today.

Today, reviewing the charisms of our founders leads us to rediscover with joy their essence. We feel called to live out the same experience of the God of Jesus, to discover for ourselves the free, unconditional, radical love of God, manifested in Jesus who died for us and who beckons us to share, through his Spirit, the love he himself lives within the family of the Trinity.

We can only go forward to enjoy a meaningful bicentenary of our Congregation if, like Jean-Marie and Gabriel, we agree to live out this experience of God.

Having an experience of God implies a fundamental grasp of one's own limits and an acceptance of receiving this Reality that we call "God". We must accept in trust this Mystery at the centre of our being since *"It is in him that we live, and move, and have our being"*. (Acts 17,28)

Such trust does not come from our own thought processes, nor from any conviction coming from an outside source. The believer embraces it as a grace and a gift from God himself. It is in such a radical trust that our faith consists, rather than in our integration into a particular religion or church. The individual "knows" he is not alone; he accepts to live according to a somewhat obscure light, but which is, nevertheless, characteristic of God. This Mystery encompasses our heart's deepest desires. What is therefore important is not to see but to be seen; it is not to know but to be known; not to call but to be called; it is not to seek but to be found. Such experience allows man, in a certain way, to enter into the mystery of God, *"where he no longer understands, but instead is moved deeply within; where he no longer develops rational arguments, but instead simply adores; where he no longer dominates, but instead finds himself dominated"*.

This *"surpassing greatness"* enables the individual to no longer be so

self-absorbed and focussed on his own desires, but rather to focus on God and to live according to Him. This is at the heart of what we call “experiencing God”.¹⁷

3.2. Looking with the “eyes of the heart”

The following is a quote about Jean-Marie but can apply to both of them:

“To speak of Jean-Marie and Gabriel Deshayes is to speak of two men with their eyes wide open, in breadth and depth: capable of seeing many things but above all, to see them more clearly, to see through reality and there discover its deepest meaning.

Where others see only faceless youngsters, events hard to understand, incompetence.... They perceive smiling faces, warm beating hearts looking for support. This is how they go through life: at all times looking with eyes open wide at a God of surprises who calls, asks, invites and engages joyfully.

And this look was full of compassionate love and tender sympathy. It would hurt them to see the children and young people that they loved so much, abandoned to their fate. They were so passionate about them because they saw them as more fragile, more vulnerable, defenceless, deprived, empty handed, but with such potential.”¹⁸

We can ask ourselves if our heart knows only how to ‘see’, or if it knows how ‘to look’ more deeply. We are born with two eyes, but without vision. There is a subtle difference between ‘seeing’ and ‘looking’. A look carries with it attentiveness, love and even passion; “my doctor gave me a good examination” a patient might say, happy with his consultation. “Look at me!”, the lover will ask, wishing to rejoice once more in her first love which may well have disappeared. One “looks at” a wound or a picture because this requires the attentiveness of the heart. To see, on the other hand, requires just a glance at an object.

We live out our lives looking, like our Founders: looking and above

¹⁷ As regards the theme of experiencing God with Jean-Marie cf. no.1, Cahier La Mennais: “*To receive oneself from God*”.

¹⁸ “*Avec Lui*” 155, November 1996.

all, being seen to be a willing object of God's look of kindness.

▪ **An attentive heart**

It is not easy to master such attentiveness. It takes courage and heart. *"This is my secret. It is very straightforward: you only see properly with the heart. What is essential is invisible to the eyes"*, the fox said to the Little Prince.¹⁹

Jean-Marie had already written in the Mémorial that when it was time to seriously discern, when it was necessary to make a decision – and the Treaty of Union was one such occasion, it was necessary to pray to God with renewed ardour, that he be the light of our heart (*Det nobis illuminatos oculos cordis*), referring to Eph 1:8 where the text indicates that it is God who enlightens the eyes of our heart.

And we must allow ourselves to be touched by what a look may uncover. *"How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?"* sang Bob Dylan. The rich man attired in purple and fine linen, banqueting lavishly, saw the beggar Lazarus every day *"stretched out at the gateway, covered in sores, wishing to fill his stomach with the leftovers from the rich man's table..."* and he saw how *"the dogs came forward to lick his wounds..."* but the rich man never looked with any love.

Without love there is blindness. God complains about his people, that they are *"idiots and without judgement, who have two eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear"*.

Through the social realism which characterised his stay at Saint-Brieuc as vicar general, Jean-Marie was moved by the reality of what he saw, his eyes transpierced by the moral poverty of the people, with children left to their own devices, a lack of formation in the clergy... A report published by the Minister of the Interior, which highlighted the failure of the legal system and showed young people to be the primary perpetrators of misdemeanours and crimes, was not to him simply a

¹⁹ Antoine De Saint-Eupery, *"The Little Prince"* (Spanish edition), Alanza, Madrid 1992, p.87.

statistical or sociological presentation, but rather made him sick to the stomach. He felt it as a shock to the system from God in order to bring him closer to the young and to give his life for them.

▪ **A look that perceives the sacramental reality**

Simone Weil made reference to the first chapter of Genesis when she referred to the beauty of the world. This is the “sacrament” of God, which fills and supports the universe: the *“beauty of the world is in the kindness of Christ’s smile that he gives us, expressed through nature itself. He is truly present in this universal beauty. Love for such beauty descends from God into our souls and returns to God, present in the universe.”*²⁰

To look with fresh eyes and see reality for what it is requires of us a transparency which ensures we do not focus on the superficial, but rather enables us to begin a journey into the depths of creation and enter into the interior intimacy of God. The challenge for us today is to look beyond appearances and find what God is saying to us, welcoming it as giving meaning and direction to all our activities, even if the paths that lead us to our goal are not all traced out in advance.

This is what Gabriel Deshayes did all his life: to acknowledge the harshness and hardness of reality, and to see it from within, from the very intimacy of God who saw the orphans, the prisoners, the unemployed, the sick, with an infinite mercy and tenderness, with a look of inexhaustible kindness.

*“The greater the crime of Peter, the more the Saviour will shower his mercy on him, giving him the grace of sincere repentance. He casts on this guilty person one of those looks of kindness which touch the heart, penetrate it and convert it.”*²¹

Jean-Marie expresses the same idea through admiration:

*“What had we done for him that he would have loved us so?
What is there in us that is worthy of attracting His glance and His*

²⁰ Simone Weil. *“The hope of God”*, Trotta, Madrid 1993, p.102.

²¹ *“Sermons”*, XXXVIII, On the Passion, p.6.

mercy?"²²

²² À Melle. Chenu, "*Anthology*", p.56.

▪ An attentive look

Attentiveness, like silence, is a loving solitude expressed in a look through which we achieve communion. It is not eternity, nor time, but the meeting of the two. It is the footstep of God. As for Elijah, it is *"the sound of a gentle breeze"* (1 Kings 19:11-13). You need attentiveness to perceive this inexpressible murmuring, the contrasts of colours, the singing of birds, the plaintiveness of those who have no voice, the weariness of the complacent! Sensitive attentiveness is needed to discover His voice in the mysterious events of life, in the apparent silence of God in our society.

*"In future, let us hold our soul more carefully in our hands, under God's eyes, so that it may act only by His Spirit and by the movement of His grace."*²³

From this comes the need to develop a new sensitivity which will allow us to discover God in the depth of the secular world, where appearances might suggest God to be more distant, where images of God are more and more fleeting or even absent, but where God is at work deep within out of his infinite passion for us. There are innumerable reflections of this absolute passion of God for us as on the surface of water. But, we need a renewed sensitivity to take in these reflections. *"Nothing is profane, here below, to him who knows how to see."*²⁴

Our desire and our pleading to be able to attain the vision of our Founders that enabled them to discern God's will together and agree upon seemingly risky projects, is expressed in the following short story which requires that one must "look" and not simply "see", which requires "savouring" and not just "reading".

Diego knew nothing about the sea: His father, Santiago Kovadloff brought him along to discover it. They journeyed

²³ "Sermons", II, p. 2532; "Anthology", p. 134.

²⁴ Fr. Teilhard de Chardin, "Le milieu divin", Taurus, Madrid 1967, p.55.

south to the headland.

The sea was waiting for them beyond the high dunes.

When the child and his father reached the sand dunes after a long walk, the sea burst forth before their eyes. Such was the immensity of the sea, such was the roar, that the child was spellbound before such beauty. And when finally he was able to speak, trembling, stuttering, he turned to his father: "Help me to take it all in!" (Eduardo Galeano).

3.3. A grateful proximity to the poor

We will say it again: if we want to re-create, to relive, to re-found the Treaty of Union (and we indeed have the duty to do so because now is a time of grace, unique and unrepeatable, 200 yrs. after its signature), we must go back to the very roots of our common identity which incorporates Gabriel and Jean-Marie well before they knew each other.

One thing that was evident was their attentiveness, their open hearts and hands turned towards the poor. It was clear, even if we do not have a detailed understanding of the times they lived through.

Before we can look at how each, in their own environment, in the middle of their different circumstances, felt compelled to reach out to the poor, as an inescapable facet of their being, we must underline that the stages of the journey they followed (experiencing God, their attentiveness towards the poor...) are the stages that all believers should follow. It is the very journey of faith spelt out in the Magnificat.

At the beginning of this canticle, we observe Mary totally immersed in God, proclaiming His greatness, singing His praises, filled with an experience of God. Then she expresses the attentiveness that lights up her very being: it's as if Mary, while looking upon Him, followed his gaze to where God was looking, and thus sees with his eyes.

From that moment on she began to reflect on the unfolding events with the gaze in which she herself felt enveloped. She who went out of her way to go and give help to her cousin, Elizabeth, now looked upon reality with the eyes of God and with the gift of prophecy of one who knew how the heart of God was turned towards to the humble of this

world. Her eyes saw beyond appearances to the depth of reality, saw those who were already in communion with Him, and those who were as yet on the outside. Such contemplation revealed to her a God who is never indifferent to those in need.

One of the characteristics of Mary's view of the world is that she saw the truth of things. Alongside a realistic awareness of the fragility of material things and of how hard life is (the existence of the hungry, the poor, the humiliated, as well as the ambitious, those with the power to oppress others), she was not deceived by appearances. She was capable of seeing the deeper reality, seeing things, people and relationships as God would see them. She also acknowledged how the hungry were satisfied, how the humble and the downtrodden were lifted up and how the rich and powerful were left empty handed. We can learn from her how to correct our understanding of the world. We should ask ourselves whether we hear only the sounds of violence, destruction and hatred, or whether we are learning, thanks to our teachers and mentors, how to listen to the little, the humble, the excluded, and their innumerable expressions of love despite the hardships and bitterness of their lives, their generosity, their quiet strength.

Such was the situation at the time of our origins and we must now strive to live this out each day.

▪ **The poor who enrich our lives**

From their childhood onwards, our Founders each developed a genuine affinity with the poor through direct contact with them. Such affinity was a strong influence on their outlook on life, making the poor obvious companions on their journey forward. Here are a few key aspects of this outlook.

In Gabriel Deshayes' case, the historical facts outline his background in poverty, a simple, humble childhood, especially following the death of Michelle, his mother, when he was barely six years old. *"He very quickly had to be involved in working in the fields especially caring for the domestic animals (cows, sheep) which he brought to pasture in the family fields or on common grazing areas... dressed in his overalls and wooden*

clogs, he would spend his early years in the countryside."²⁵

It is possible, following a custom of biographers of the period, that certain details have been exaggerated and that later responsibilities have been transposed onto his childhood. But, hidden behind the literary style there is a foundation of historical truth.

*"Right from childhood, Deshayes began the practice of good works which would last his whole life. With the permission of his father, we presume, he gave to the poor all that fell into his hands, clothes to this one, socks to someone else, half a slice of bread to one, a calf's head to another. Sometimes even, he took the very meat being cooked for the family."*²⁶

Jean-Marie lived in a very different world. His childhood provided the promise of a successful future, despite the sad circumstances of the death of his mother. His financial situation was enviable, as too was his family protection. His future was opening up before him like a calm, wide blue ocean.

He was imbued, however, with his parents' love for those who had nothing and he followed suit. What his father did touched him deeply. Everyone recognised his sensitivity towards the most deprived; they witnessed his concern and creative support during the hemp and linen crisis which left many families without work or financial means. When word came that the authorities were looking for ways to solve the crisis, he replied to the quartermaster of Brittany, his direct superior, that his ships were already at St. Petersburg, at Schuken and at Danzig, to collect hemp and linen.

He showed how he valued human worth by looking to the futures of the young: he set up a school for the Daughters of the Cross at Saint-Servan to weave hemp.

These experiences were the wellsprings of Jean-Marie's childhood. It is useful to see how such experiences remained with him into adult life.

"Do you know the story of this good person, unknown to us, who, in recognition of services rendered by my father, fifty years ago, paid a debt of 2000F which Féli was blamed for. This man, it

²⁵ Jean Chéory. "Gabriel Deshayes, Priest of Providence, 1767-1841", p. 21.

²⁶ François Laveau, "Vie du Fr. Gabriel Deshayes", pp.11-12.

*would appear, in 1790, went to cross over to England. He was shipwrecked near St Brieuc and was transferred to the hospital at St Malo. He was in a bed next to that of a poor man who spoke of my family, whom he referred to as the saviours of the town, and without more ado he arrived at our house. We were having a meal when he came in and he was given every possible care and three months later he left without any further news from him. Today he volunteered to be responsible for paying Féli's debt."*²⁷

Likewise, the "option for the poor" for our Founders is something that came to them naturally. Their apostolic work from the beginning would be marked by the closeness to the very poor.

▪ **Poor among the poor**

We are going back to the years before they first met and well before signing the Treaty of Union. Without knowing each other, with very different personal skills, their pastoral concerns turned naturally towards the poor breathing the same air that had surrounded them during their childhood.

Gabriel started his pastoral work in calm times, after the disturbance of the revolution, at Paimpont, then at Beignon. The bishop named him parish priest of Auray, a small town of 3,000 inhabitants, a centre of pilgrimage for the Brittany region which venerated St. Anne with a very strong devotion. To underline and justify his appointment the Minister said, *"This priest deserves to have this position because of his talents and for the spirit which drives him forward."*²⁸

This spirit showed itself immediately through his turning to the needs of the deprived. Gabriel was the type of priest where what you saw was what you got. He was naturally drawn to practical matters rather than to intellectual niceties, a man with an uncommon sensitivity to social issues.

²⁷ To Miss de Lucinière, 24th January 1841.

²⁸ Archives of the diocese of Vannes. Pancemont correspondence, letter 29 Ventose XII (20th March 1804).

He began by restoring the hospice which housed the severely sick and injured: elderly persons, abandoned children, the handicapped. They would no longer feel neglected given the solicitude offered by this priest.

In a period of scarcity and even penury, he started several initiatives to combat unemployment and chronic poverty. He opened a sewing workshop here and organised road repairs there; wherever a need was perceived, he was fired up to respond; he preferred to use up his energies in active work, rather than rest in the safety of routine and lethargy.

He would discretely come to the aid of poor people living in shame, those who were victims of life's misadventures... Without counting the cost to himself, he would regularly visit the local prison because sadness and emptiness were so clearly and depressingly present there, because promiscuity, moral poverty and idleness filled the hours there and were but a mirage of true life. Two women helped him to provide material support, friendship and catechism lessons.

The state governor, the prefect Julien, wrote to the Minister of the interior that, *"This small town has more charity provision than almost all the others in the county."*²⁹

As regards to Jean-Marie, he began his pastoral involvement at the theological college in St Malo as a young 22 year old sub deacon. The material conditions were precarious, human resources scarce, monetary worries were great and working conditions spartan. In spite of all this, the college welcomed its quota of students, pupils considered as promising for the future of both France and the Church. There were no books, but Jean-Marie learned how to produce an abundance of work sheets for the different subjects, redoubling his efforts as both student and teacher of Theology, to the point of physical exhaustion. These experiences helped him to realise that teaching was the surest way to open up possibilities for the future.

In the same school lived candidates preparing for the priesthood and children from the families of St Malo. In 1808, the statistics were as follows: *"We have about 80 students, from all groups, in our small seminary at St. Malo. We can count on more than 60 going on for the*

²⁹ National archives, F 10 III Morbihan.

*Church. They are inspired by a higher motive, thanks to the ardent zeal and care of M. Vielle, who is at the head of this excellent establishment.”*³⁰

Those coming from abandoned or impoverished outlying areas in Brittany lived a precarious existence. Students from St. Malo came as day pupils, returning to their families each evening, whereas those from elsewhere in Brittany were taken in as guests of individual St. Malo homes.

*“Those from neighbouring areas live as guests in the town. Parents would send them small food provisions of butter, lard etc... from the market.”*³¹

Given this situation, his inherited sensitivity to the needs of others became ever stronger towards the most needy, the poorest, the weakest, the underprivileged, the most fragile. Such sensitivity developed from a profound empathy for the human condition and his proximity to needy children only served to deepen this empathy. A particularly remarkable example of such tender-hearted concern for those in need can be found in the way that the two brothers La Mennais (Jean-Marie and Félicité) supported for many years a pupil who suffered from particularly poor health.

When in 1811 the imperial decree closing the Junior Seminary in St. Malo was promulgated, their only thought was of the future of their seminarians who would now have to go to Rennes to continue their studies. It was with a heavy heart that Jean-Marie wrote to Fr. Millaux, rector of the Rennes seminary: *“I realize fully how embarrassed you may be to receive all those who will arrive with nothing... I have thirty of them before me who not only have no money to offer, but have not even a piece of bread... Nothing in the world would want me to lose one of these lambs entrusted to me by Providence.”*³²

The following year, he continued to be totally involved with his students, after having found places for them to stay. He wrote to M. de la

³⁰ To Bruté de Rémur, February 2nd, 1808.

³¹ Letter to Miss Meslé de Grand-Clos, Laveille, p.49.

³² To Fr. Millaux, *General Correspondence*, Letter 100, October 1812.

Guérétrie, parish priest of Vitré, who welcomed four seminarians:

*"Providence has, through you, given them a very special father. Four others are already at Rennes and I do not know if they have a place in the Junior Seminary. I will do all in my power to help them pay their boarding fees and if I cannot support them in everything financially I will accept any gifts you may be able to give."*³³

▪ **Models of blessed poverty made from bright clay.**

To live in poverty is much more than just living shoulder to shoulder with the poor of this world, much more than just working to re-establish their human dignity and material security.

*"The poor person recognises that all belongs to God and presents himself before God with a simple and unique truth: having nothing... as someone who can say, 'God alone suffices'."*³⁴

In the context of the bicentenary of the Congregation it could be said that the most important step we are asked to take is to return to our sources, a return to who we are; to reconcile ourselves with the darkness of the "everyday"; to renounce the temptation to be seen as super heroes, in favour of a simple, fraternal proximity, recognising our own limitations and poverty, being capable of asking for help when necessary.

We might qualify religious life today as a "Kairos into the depths" where we need to descend to the depths of our awareness of our own poverty and limitations and from such depths cry out to the Lord.

The acceptance of our limitations, of our personal insignificance, the clear understanding of being simple instruments in the hand of Someone infinitely greater than ourselves, the experience of emptiness... these are all concepts and illustrations that show the depth of our personal poverty.

Two facts from the lives of Jean-Marie de la Mennais and Gabriel Deshayes will suffice as illustrations:

Gabriel received his shepherd's crook as a young boy and his bread

³³ To Father de la Guérétrie, September 7, 1813.

³⁴ B. Lambert, "Las Bienaventuranza y la cultura hoy", Salamanca 1987, p 75.

basket for keeping his lunch in; two objects that he treasured all his life; *"If I ever think of myself as someone important, I will remember where I came from"*³⁵

Jean-Marie said: *"Father Blanc would have wished that they spoke of the departure of my Brothers for Guadeloupe in the newspapers. Personally, I do not want this. The works of God grow only in darkness, and it is during the night that the dew falls from heaven."*³⁶

Ever since the Council issued the decree *Perfectae Caritatis* we have repeatedly heard the call to "return to your roots" of your Order or congregation: a call to a passionate reunion with your Founders, with their original intuitions, to the rediscovery of your own charism. Behind such an exhortation lies the conviction that the "Mother House" has an immense capacity to heal and bring back the wounded, the exhausted, the lost.

It is time to recommit ourselves to this initiative, from the starting point of what has already been achieved, using the "wisdom of the return home" that the young son in the parable of the prodigal son offers us.

The Book of Genesis says, *"In the beginning the earth was formless and empty"*. In Luke 15:16, this emptiness was brought on by a hunger which became the starting point of the young son's desire to return to his father's house. At the time of Adam's creation, *"God breathed into his nostrils a breath of life"* (Gn 2:7). Ever since, the possibility of life has depended on the emptiness and poverty within us, because this emptiness is the necessary condition for us to receive from God. From this moment all inadequacy, symbolised by hunger, thirst, fragility, poverty or sterility becomes, paradoxically, the occasion for God to dispense his mercy and to stimulate in us a desire for communion with him.

We will discover a new freedom, walking beneath the sun, without trace of bitterness or resentment, but rather with the joy of the poor man in the gospel who announces to others what he has received from Jesus, without portraying himself as someone of importance, ensuring that one's focus is always on Jesus.

³⁵ François Laveau, p. 33.

³⁶ To Melle de Licinière, A II, 238 Anthology, p.204.

The least significant characters in this story, the poor who were embraced by Gabriel and Jean-Marie, could be those who lead us to this Easter that is the sign of the future Kingdom, without us getting lost in the search for an impossible perfection. They can teach us that it is not necessary to wait for perfect justice in order to make a place in our lives for tenderness and celebration.

3.4. Children and young people in the school context.

(“Train teachers who are pious and strong in the faith.” Treaty of Union)

Jean-Marie and Gabriel tirelessly pursued this project of love for the least of all without trace of discouragement. They considered education to be the most appropriate, most lasting, most effective way to equip young people for a better future. They did not want a higher authority to come along and water down the vision which God had given them to guide their response to the needs they saw. They would send their sons where no Christian education was being provided: firstly, to the smallest of villages, then to mission territories, including places where slavery was practised in colonial times... to the peripheries.

The school was the focal point, the core which united them so strongly. Over and above their differences on how to proceed, in terms of style and culture, they agreed on the essential questions, as we have already outlined. The one thing that bound them together, that helped them to understand each other and to work together, was the school.

▪ The decisive encounter with children

The succession of events that brought them together personally, the correspondence and the increasingly warm friendship between Jean-Marie and Gabriel are described earlier in this document.³⁷

We will not revisit the dates and events of their meetings together which enabled progress on the Treaty of Union, but we must nevertheless reiterate that it was their focus on the school that led to such a powerful synergy between the two of them, that it is the focus on the school which today allows us to plunge into the wellspring of our origins, 200 years later, to quench our thirst for a better future.

We will develop just two further points on this matter, as another document addressing this question will soon be published.

Gabriel carried deeply within him *“the texture of the soil, the difficulties of working the land, the beautifully straight furrows in the*

³⁷ Cf. above: Mission brings unity, p.7.

fields” and these inspired who to give to the Congregation of Mennaisian Brothers a straight path for us to follow, leading us to the poorest, going where no-one else dares to go.

“Providence inspired me with the idea of starting a Congregation of Brothers to serve the small towns and the countryside where the De la Salle Brothers are unable to go.”³⁸

Jean-Marie knew the streets of St. Malo so well, a town built of granite and open to the sea in every direction. He would enrich this school model with an emphasis on a holistic, integrated educational method:

“In these schools we form the entire person, the heart as well as the spirit... My dear Brothers, here is the true purpose of all education and especially the one given by our Brothers in their schools. A remarkable thing that experience reveals every day; our students progress rapidly in human sciences, but even more rapidly in the first of all sciences, the science of human and Christian duty...”³⁹

It is significant and comforting to bear witness today, 200 years later, to how the mission has united men who are so different, to the way that they have been united by indissoluble bonds of fraternity. Let us read and savour the following extracts from Jean-Marie’s letters.

“For the last two years I have undertaken together with Fr. Deshayes, parish priest of Auray, the training of schoolmasters for the Breton countryside and small towns. We place them alone or two together, according to the needs of the communities that ask for them.

In the diocese of Saint-Brieuc I have opened eight schools of that type, in which instruction is given to more than fifteen hundred children, following the method of the Brothers. The vast majority of these children do not pay for their education; nine other similar schools have been opened in the dioceses of Vannes and

³⁸ To R.P. Lamarche, a Dominican in Rome.

³⁹ On the occasion of opening a school, around 1845. “Sermons” II, 793-800 Anthology, p. 298.

Rennes.

We hope to organise this young institution on a more permanent basis. But, before giving it definite rules and regulations and asking for a legal approbation, it is necessary first to buy a house to serve as headquarters and to increase the number of our members. In order to facilitate this increase, I have opened a novitiate at St. Brieuc where 14 men currently reside, paid for by myself and M. Deshayes.

Your Excellency knows the deplorable state of ignorance and poverty that exists in most of our Breton parishes and how language difficulties make teaching younger children very difficult. The only way to overcome this ignorance and the many problems that follow from the lack of pastors, is to increase the number of Christian schools and develop the training of teachers, who are motivated solely by religion to accomplish these difficult tasks. They cost parishes little, but inspire in their pupils' parents a total and highly deserved confidence.”⁴⁰

One can see the common thread running through this letter.

“We have seen the poverty, the reality of a situation which is clearly evident. We see that the Christian school is the best way forward in answering the needs which touch our hearts... on this we are in agreement.”

This mission united our two Founders.

The following is particularly informative, showing the creative innovation of the Spirit working in the hearts of our Founders:

“Mr President

M. De La Salle desired to send some of his Brothers into the countryside to run schools, but he was deterred by the problem of finding, in each village, the resources to support two Brothers in their work and because he feared for a Brother working alone, as he put it, the dangers of relaxation: furthermore, their Rule of Life demands that they live in community.

⁴⁰ Letter 958 to the Minister. Deo Soli 3, p. 30.

M. Deshayes, former parish priest of Auray, and myself, think that it is almost impossible, as M. de la Salle pointed out, to expect his Congregation to run country and small town schools. But, one could achieve this result by starting another congregation destined to furnish primary teachers in villages that are too poor and have too few people to open a school with three Brothers.

In order to avoid the two main inconveniences which prevented M.de la Salle from starting such an important project, we have set up for the Brothers of Christian Instruction, as they will be called, the rules which I am pleased to copy to you.”⁴¹

To reply to the stark reality that cried out to them, they accepted the call to found and organise something very new which would allow them to go where De la Salle Brothers could not go. They invented new rules, set up new structures and felt the Spirit blowing them into the unknown. The Brothers who were sent out “on their own” knew that nothing was impossible, however difficult or risky it might appear, despite the threat of storms to come. Jean-Marie said the same in the letter quoted above, sharing responsibility for them with Gabriel. Only a deeply rooted religious motivation could face up to such difficulties. Rightly, these Brothers would have as motto “God Alone”.

Finally, in the very sterile and concise terms of a legal document such as a royal ordinance, appeared the ideas that constituted the union of our Founders, a union born for the mission and which led to the mission:

“Louis, by the grace of God, King of France and Navarre.

Given the Statutes and Regulations of a Charitable Association wishing to serve primary schools in the towns and countryside within the counties of the former province of Brittany under the name of the Congregation of Christian Instruction:

The Society formed by Fathers de la Mennais and Deshayes with the aim of procuring teachers for the primary schools to the counties comprising the former province of Brittany...”

Here are shown, in condensed form, the threads used to weave our Congregation into existence: an intuition, a call from on high which

⁴¹ To the President of the Royal Council on Public Instruction, St. Briec, 14 November, 1821, “Sermons” II, 820 bis, “Anthology”, p. 298.

associates different points of view, incites us to trace paths of **love and charity** (the creation of a charitable Association) and find a way forward for those who are **last, the forgotten, the abandoned** (in the villages).

The **school** is this way and the weavers of the our future tapestry are **Fathers de la Mennais and Dehayes**, two men who were united, shaped and led beyond themselves by a God who had sent them both on the same mission.

▪ **The School of Jesus, the Master**

Right from the beginning, even before the Treaty of union was in place, when the first Brothers were living in presbyteries with the priests of the local parishes, the Brother had his own mission. He was not a parish helper, a sacristan, nor an ordained coadjutor.

From the charismatic point of view, the Brother has no need of a further consecration beyond his religious consecration in order to live out fully his vocation. He lives out the priesthood of the faithful without the need for sacred spaces or isolation. He experiences the holy presence of God in his proximity to young children in the heart of the school.

*"Your **school** is therefore a **temple** where you exercise one of the most august functions of the priesthood, that of education. From your pulpit you speak in the name of Jesus Christ. You are his substitute and so you have nothing in common with the mercenaries for whom a school is nothing more than a workshop of reading, writing and mathematics, and who build education in the same way as carpenters make a piece of furniture."*⁴²

The Brother sees education as a mission and not as a task; as a priesthood and not a job; as a ministry and not a profession... and sees himself as a shepherd and not as a mercenary.

The conviction of Jean-Marie and Gabriel's intuitions as regards the mission of the school in the early part of the 19th century is impressive. Jean-Marie wrote the following to the Daughters of Providence:

*"In this school, the teachers are sitting at **the pulpit of Jesus Christ**, who did not plan anything else for himself while on earth;*

⁴² To the Brothers, "Sermons" VII, 2326-27, "Anthology", p. 295.

*they do **what Jesus Christ did**; they repeat what he said; they are the ministers of God, the interpreters of his will, the dispensers of his mysteries.*"⁴³

Thus, we were born into the world and the Church. Today, is the appropriate time to be reborn in order to seek out new ways and new models of collaboration, with the aim of sharing today in the same spirit that rendered the years 1819 and 1820 so fertile. Our celebrations should be experienced as a call to go beyond our comfort zones and routines.

Max Weber, a sociologist, has used a very eloquent way of expressing the evolution of educational institutions over the years. He speaks of "the charism become a routine". The charism is rather an intuition, a message, an ideal at the foundation of a movement. With the inexorable passing of time, the routine and institutional aspects of a Brother's life tend to dominate over the other aspects of the movement. An institution should be questioned in the light of its foundation, but also through the means made available to guard against falling into a routine and so remain faithful to its initial charism.

Pope Francis warns us against this temptation putting an emphasis on a paternal solicitude, emphasising an urgency to react:

*"Some resist giving themselves over completely to mission and thus end up in a state of paralysing listlessness... This is how the greatest menace takes shape, a sad pragmatism of everyday life in the church, where apparently everything occurs normally, whereas, in reality, faith is becoming weaker through pettiness. A tomb psychology develops and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum."*⁴⁴

▪ **A community of disciples at School of the Gospel**

"You must not allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one Teacher, the Christ." (Mt 23:8)

In the Gospel several people call Jesus "Rabbi" or "Master" and

⁴³ To the Providence of St. Brieuc, November 14, 1821, "Sermons", II 820 bis, "Anthology", p. 298.

⁴⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 81 and 83.

when he said to his disciples, *"You must not allow yourselves to be called teachers"* he wanted to insist that they were not to seek the power, the domination and the vain glory associated with Rabbis who relied on servile submission and not on the shared fraternity which he preached. Jesus noted the difference not only because he was imbued with a unique authority, but through his own way of forming relationships. His uniqueness as teacher, did not come from any special aspects of his pedagogy, but above all, from transforming educational relationships into a salvation experience. No one who came into contact with Jesus remained the same.

Jesus was an extremely attractive and fascinating person, but he showed himself as teacher by his personal traits and that is why he could be both teacher and a lesson itself. This reality is expressed right from his first statement when he said, *"Follow me"* (Mk 1:17). In this *"me"* we see our compass. Jesus does not offer a doctrine, a programme, but rather his person. And this is also the starting place of being a disciple: *"The disciple who is fully trained becomes like his teacher."* (Lk 6:40)

This way of understanding education and of building a school is attractive. It is not put in terms of transferring knowledge or the development of skills, but fundamentally of building up an identity at the heart of an intense interrelation. For this, the path followed by Jesus focussed on meeting people.

However, he does not follow an established programme; he creates links with each person. He turns each situation into an opportunity. He is not worried about leaving something written to stay in the memory, but he inspires unforgettable events. He goes down the road of dialogue, of questioning. He chooses to confront situations of sadness and people's heartfelt expectations, to welcome them or question them, in different languages. These are encounters within the human experience that promote the Kingdom of God.

A school of encounter: it is only through an unconditional welcome that we can clearly express ourselves before one who does not judge us, who is not patronising, who does not embarrass us through any patient tolerance or condescending kindness, but who puts himself in our subjective world and shares our own experiences. When we sense that

someone has become involved in our problems, helps us to talk about them, listens to our story without interrupting then we can say that we are in the presence of Jesus the Teacher, perhaps without realizing it.

This school of encounter is only possible if one is able to feel the other's presence and regard him as a friend (cum-pane: sharing the same bread, and consequently, meeting him at the same level, at the same table.)

At this time of bicentenary, of remembrance and creativity, it remains for us to let the light shine, just as Gabriel and Jean-Marie allowed the light to shine on the future they were called to build. Let us open the eyes of our hearts in order to look more deeply.

- o To look at the world with fresh eyes, those of God our creator, renewing in each of us and in each school the phrase *"and he saw that it was good"*, certain that in our school it is possible to make real *"the new heaven and the new earth"*.

- o To look at the school with the fresh eyes of the Master, who knows the importance of *"teaching with calmness"* of *"I am with you"*, of *"believe in my works"*, of *"I was sent to..."* because in our school we will make possible the call to *"say what you have seen and heard"*, announcing the Good News to the poor.

- o To look upon the work of evangelisation in a prophetic way knowing that, without silver or gold in our school, we have received the Spirit who allows us to say to our charges and to our society: *"In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, get up and walk"*.

CONCLUSION:

A reminder to help us set off towards 2019-2020

We cannot forget belonging to a community of remembering, rooted in tradition of a people familiar with the dictum: Remember! "Remember that you were a servant in Egypt" (Dt 5:2); "Remember the path that the Lord your God made you walk..." (Dt 8:2); "Remember the marvels he has done, his wonders, the judgements of his mouth." (Ps105:5).

The memory, like a breaking wave, surrounds our present, makes us participants and contemporaries of the event, "Remember Jesus, risen from among the dead", Paul recommended to Timothy (2 Tim 2:8).

In a scene from Mark, Jesus invites his disciples to an act of memory: they were discussing among themselves because they had forgotten to provide bread, they had only one loaf, and this forgetfulness filled their attention to the extent of forgetting the past: "Do you not remember? When I broke five loaves among the five thousand?... and when I broke seven loaves for the four thousand, how many baskets full of scraps did you collect?" (Mk 8:19-21).

The moment when he had broken and distributed several loaves to relieve the hunger of a crowd, was recent but the eyes, the ears, the heart of those present were blocked, incapable of understanding the sign.

And if he invited them to recall this extravagance, it is only to remember that such abundance might turn their attention from what they lacked at the moment.

This interior work is all the more necessary when, given the fact of being in a minority, fatigue and limitations due to age and fragility ("We have only one loaf...") threaten to monopolize our whole attention and to colour the present with sombre tones of complaint and the impression that living this stage of life under the sign of scarcity, lack or penury is inevitable. As for the Israelites in the desert, two

ways are open before us at this stage: that of grumbling and that of blessing. To choose the latter supposes the use of selective memory to remind us of the twelve baskets of gifts with which we have been showered. When we concentrate on this, gratitude inevitably pours forth for such a great gift received, for so much mercy, and so much grace."

From a text by Dolores Aleixandre

Remember the experience you have lived. Return to the wellspring from where flows the river on which you sail.

Remember the differences between Jean-Marie and Gabriel which were replaced by an unquestionable unity of mind and heart.

Recall their experience of an absolute closeness to God, of his care that made them capable of taking courageous risks as Founders and call others to join them in their adventure.

Discover their attentiveness to the needs of the world, which led them to see the world and feel its life with the tenderness regard of God the Father.

Keep in mind the details of their lives, where we see hearts open to the poor in their vulnerability, in their solitude and in their need of a paternal welcome.

Never forget the meaning of their communion: the school, a place of fraternal togetherness, a welcoming nest, enabling growth and life.

From this will come the dynamism and energy that will allow you to make history.

Together, all of us together, always together... let us rewrite the Treaty!

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