

La Mennais Studies

To receive oneself from God

Brother Josu Olabarrieta

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Preface

In the series of volumes under the name of mennaisian studies which have initiated historical research on the themes of the foundation of our Institute, this first work opens a new mennaisien review: “ La Mennais Studies” Brother Josu Olabarrieta the editor of the review has moved on from the purely historic plain of the earlier work to cover more directly those things which emphasise our mennaisiancharism today. These publications which will be carefully translated into the three principal languages of the congregation, and will be available to lay people and to the brothers of the Mennaisian family will include essays along the lines of Mennaisian spirituality and education. Therefore they will offer, as the general chapter of 2012 desired, resources for the initial and permanent formation of both groups.

Leaning heavily, as much on the witness of the life of Jean-Marie de la Mennais as on his writings the intention of this new publication is to invite us to enter into the spirit of our founder. It will offer to the reader, whatever his situation, profession or age: ideas on how to generously follow Jean-Marie de la Mennais listening to God’s spirit and his desire to generously and humbly serve his brothers especially the most lowly. Through them we will be introduced into his thoughts and into his heart as if on a sure road to follow Christ. It will seek to display through the experience of our founder’s life everything which nourishes and gives direction to our life

The word of God will be paramount as it should be for such a project. But throughout these pages Br Josu will also quote, as he has already done in that first volume, from other spiritual authors, but also from lay people and brothers(nor sure why you want to change this the who’s witness will allow us to more fully understand the essence and the vitality of our charism. These will seem like overtures which illuminate one or other shade of colour or light on the proposed tableau and should impact on the life of the reader. These will be like calls to re-examine one's own life and to grasp how God speaks, works and transforms as with his love.

This first number opens the way. We are going to walk with the author. We will follow with him a route which will make us examine an interior panorama which, through each volume will better enable us to understand what it is to be a Mennaisian. We will recognise ourselves. Perhaps we will be urged to leave the road we are walking to allow ourselves to be led along new paths. Because, as the author has written "spirituality is nothing more than being truly alive, inspired and carried away by the wind, the breeze or the tempest". And as soon as the spirit takes control, it is like the wind, we do not know from where it comes or where it is going to.

We are then invited to allow ourselves to be led. It is as the first number suggests, the fundamental attitude which brings us into the company of Jean-Marie de la Mennais: we accept God so that He may change us into his image.

Our thanks to Br Josu for introducing us into the secret life of Jean-Marie and of allowing us to experience it. We hope that with him. We may take this path and continue to turn towards the future which offers us new and enriching openings.

Frère Yannick HOUSSAY

Nobody questions the fact that the life of Jean-Marie de la Mennais was a fully "spiritual" life, in the deepest and most authentic meaning of the word. Throughout his life he was open to the breath of the Spirit, who from the beginning directed his life, too God's call. He was always available and open. At the age of 27 when recovering from sickness, he wrote with humour "I continue to hope that I will die in good health". Whereas a century and a half ago he directed his life towards eternity, we might have engraved on his tomb "He died of an excess of life". Indeed he lived according to the will of God who had filled him with life in abundance.

It would be easy for us to draw up a list of the most familiar topics in the spirituality of Jean-Marie. They would be "God alone", "confidence in Providence", "at the service of the church", "humility"... There would be plenty of material for development

However while wanting to put them in order, to set priorities to make this work more systematic, we can run the risk of side lining what is most important in his spirituality. This has often remain implicit as is the case for many other Christian and human spiritualities. It is to this point that I would like to address this issue of my studies. My intention is not to list quotations, to enumerate opinions or to include significant anecdotes in the life of Jean-Marie. I rather feel myself attracted, called and urged by Someone to live the fullness of life which every one-like Jean-Marie-are daily invited.

However the principal theme which characterised Jean-Marie's life, and from which everything else follows and which constitutes his and central "raison d'être" is the theme of "to receive his life from God". He experienced it because he felt that somehow he had an origin.. He felt that he did not have in himself the root or the reason for his. He received himself and receive all his life as the gift of Somebody who preceded him. He had the feeling of "receiving life and receiving himself within it".

This basic experience consisted in admitting this absolute fact that this Somebody preceded me in recognising his attention and the loving anticipation which characterised his relationship with my life. This makes me say with the psalmist "in you is my beginning and my all".

1-A DEEP CONVICTION : TO LET MYSELF BE LED

It is impossible to understand the action and the principal attitude of Jean-Marie and the central principals of his thought if we are unable to perceive mysteriously but vividly the feeling that we are “sons”. It is from this that he received the solid and joyful confidence in the God who is present. Being a beloved son meant that he thought only of doing His will in everything. He could have no other compass on his journey than that of God alone. To know that he is protected by the loving hands of the father-mother who gave him the courage to embrace the cross and to accept with serenity all the trials of his life...Jean-Marie always felt enveloped by the presence of someone who preceded him. He felt that he had been chosen.

It was not because of his determination to seek and to love that he opened himself up to the Invisible One. God is not the answer to a question. If he were he would have converted to an idol, an object, a concept, an answer. We all know that if God ranks above us then the initiative will always come from Him. All the mystics knew this. In this sense the proper spiritual attitude is rather one of passivity. We do not seek the truth; it is the Truth who seeks us.

One of the greatest difficulties we may have in life has been expressed by an author as "epistemology of the Hunter". It indicates the fact of setting out with the rifle of knowledge, of reason, with the intention of reaching the object and capturing it.

But the experience of God demands an opposite reaction: we must allow ourselves to be surprised and seduced. We have to allow ourselves to be seized and understood. We have to allow this to happen to us.

Jean-Marie experienced this indwelling. He did not sense that he was looking at Someone but rather that he was being looked at, that he was not loving but being love.

In this way St. Paul speaking about the knowledge of God says then we will know, rather we would be known by him (Gal 4,9). Jean-Marie expressed himself in a similar way,

“Dear Brothers I repeat, it is necessary that in this retreat all of you without exception become penetrated by the spirit, or rather that you ask our heavenly Father with great and ardent fervour that he instils it in you.”¹

a-looked at by Him

When we approached Jesus as did all the gospel people, we will immediately notice that he is looking at us; he knows how to look at people. The gospel says "he saw Matthew sitting at the tax office", that "he saw Zaccheus sitting in the sycamore tree" that "he saw Peter after the third denial and that he saw his mother and the disciple that he loved at the foot of the cross. Jesus' glance penetrates the depth of our being and at the same time brings healing.

If we take as our guide the Magnificat we will be enraptured: "*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour because He has looked up on His humble servant*", Mary recognising that this is how Jesus sees her and rejoices with her whole being. From this joy is born like a spring the living water of her praise: "*my soul exults in God my saviour*"...

This is the first thing that we learn from the Magnificat if we want to be overshadowed by him what we must do above everything, else is quite simple we must allow ourselves to be looked at by God, to feel that we are welcomed and enveloped in his tenderness, his forgiveness, in his unconditional love, regardless of what we are. Indeed what he sees in us is not our good or bad actions, our errors, our merits, our mistakes, our qualities

“So my daughter, be at peace, not because you are good, but because God is good, because He is our Father.”²

¹ S. VII 2295

² To Miss Jallobert, copied in the Memorial, 127.1

What the father sees in others is the image of his son, and in Him, we "are enrich by every good gift (1Cor 1,5), what John of the Cross recognised when he wrote,

"Yes you can look at me, after you have looked at me, because of your glance grace and beauty has been left within me"³

It is strange that what we need to do is precisely to do and to say nothing, except just to open ourselves to this Love which inclines towards us so that we may allow ourselves to be loved and contemplated, to release the mooring ropes hoist up the sails and to allow ourselves to be carried by the wind and the tide.

"So let us be more careful in the future than we have been so far, to keep our souls in our hands so to say under the eyes of God so that we act only by His spirit and by the movement of his grace".

Enfolding us, enveloping us, these eyes of unconditional acceptance will always remain beyond our trials and pains, beyond the difficult experiences and the moments of silence. Sometimes events seem to submerge us, sometimes our existence is harsh and oppressive, sometimes the meaning of life seems to disappear. Then there is nothing else to do but simply to hold on, to struggle in the nakedness of our faith, assured that:

"if He hides His face from you for a moment his eyes are nevertheless fixed on you"⁴

To let ourselves be watched by God every morning to accept that He opens our eyes to see the world, people and events with a new, lucid and pure gaze which will revitalise our mission to children and young people. Thus we will be able to live spiritually since spirituality is nothing but life in the spirit, life that breathes, life that is stimulated and carried by the breath, the breeze, or the power of the spirit.

Spirituality consists in living in the Spirit who lives within us all, in the Spirit who accompanies and comforts, who frees us and allows us to grow. He draws us closer, makes us more compassionate. He makes us capable of

³ Sermon "Means to keep the fruits of the retreat » T.II, p.654

⁴ To Miss Jallobert, August 4, 1815

peace and harmony. He teaches as how to look at people with attention respect and wonder.

“He enables us to see all that is sacred and to admire it and to be attentive to it

As the Upanishad Indians say it is not the I which sees but him who sees through the eye, it is not the ear that hears but him who hears through the ear, it is not thought that thinks, he who thinks in the thought, it is not the sensors that feel but him who feels in the sensors.

“The eye that you see is not the eye because you see it, it is the eye because it sees you”⁵

Or

The eyes towards which you sigh know it quite well, the eyes into which you gaze are eyes because they see you
(A Machados)

⁵ Cf. Jose Arregi, *Spiritualité pour aujourd’hui*.

His first grandson had just been born. Being a grandfather was wonderful, and an experience which he had cultivated with love during the months of his daughter in law's pregnancy. It was something that he wanted to happen again, many times, so affected was he by this experience of fatherhood.

His grandson was born prematurely, he was smaller and lighter than normal

"We stayed for a whole hour looking at each other confessed the delighted grandfather. I held him in my hand. I could almost hold him in one hand. And we just admired each other. Even if at this age babies do not see or perceived shapes clearly.

...

No, I can read sorrow in his eyes, even reproach I was not able to fully understand this event which was so new to him-that are being looked at by his grandson it was not a problem of the sensors, it was a problem of meaning.

I appreciate the presence of God in creation. It feels as though I am watched and enveloped when I walk in the countryside, climb mountains, when I contemplate a river, examine a flower, look at the grass that springs up, or the trees that blossom I feel so small just a part of something much greater

I feel stared at when I see a brother and in a special way also when I meet old people. That may seem stupid but when I touch the faces and these hands shaped by time and work, these hands all creased, almost transparent and, I feel as though the greatness of God is looking at me, God who uses something humble, something greater, something humble come close to me. And in this meeting with my brother I do not mind the silence it seems as though the silence is alive. And what I feel and meet in creation, I feel now when meeting what is the "summit of creation".

b- Loved by Him

The *love of God* : this expression again holds a variety meaning and nuances. This intentional, conversion presupposes that God is not a simple object of human desire. But what is absolutely decisive is the love which God bears to human beings

This love renders him capable of calling them and then of opening their hearts to make them able to receive him.

I love for God basically consists in letting ourselves be loved by Him, in accepting being loved, in welcoming his love which means we must respond to that thoughtful love of God towards us a love that reawakes our love for him.

Jean-Marie will express with enthusiasm this radical reality which exceeds human understanding and leaves us dumb (literally unutterable-speechless): God delighting in his love for mankind. God finding in this love his delight. In an incomprehensible way it is God who seeks man and is delighted to find him.

“Requiescet super eos Spiritus Domini ! What a promise! This indwelling of the spirit of God in a soul is unutterable who will be able to understand and describe these secrets of love, these mysteries of heaven ? Only a soul beloved of the spirit of God”⁶ .

Moreover the human person is by grace essentially lovable, worthy of love and attractive in the eyes of God. In the canticle of Luke (Luke 2;140) we hear the message of the Angels proclaiming, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men he loves". "Whom he loves... "This is a good translation of the Greek word *eudokia* (beautiful appearance) which comes from the Hebrew word meaning in the old Testament the feeling of kindness desire love joy... This word has the same root as the word designating the state of being in love (cf. Gen. 34, 19)

This component of kindness contained in the word *eudokia* makes possible this translation of the Angels and then "be in peace (peace, harmony,

⁶ *Memorial*, 70-71

joy..) Because you have a beautiful appearance in the eyes of God, because you have attracted his favours, because she loves you freely and his kindness finds a place in you...

Such is the meaning of that expression which has often been translated by "peace to men of goodwill". This latter translation implied that peace is intended only to good people leaving aside all the others. It was reinforced by a tendency to think that God loves us only if we are good: it is precisely the opposite of what the text says by announcing the unconditional love that the father has for us!

And Jean-Marie -marvellous coincidence! Has strong words that bring together the two parts of the canticle of the Angels in the Gospel of Luke: Glory and Peace. The glory of God and peace on human being that God liked so much.

He liked to see us sleeping quietly on his breast, **our peace is his glory**. This thought is very comforting and charms the hearts of Christian's who contemplate it.⁷

In these words we see something like an echo of "the glory of God is man fully alive"⁸ of Ireneus of Lyons, words that go back to the beginning of Christianity in the 2nd century, and that impresses more and more the current religious conscience. The purpose of the presence of God is to affirm and accomplish the fullness of human life.

In this living experience of feeling united with the source from where everything comes (which explains our thirst for God) in this living experience of searching-search provoked by a previous encounter ("I seek you because you have found me"), there does not exist a deeper or truer experience than the one Jesus had expressed by calling God His<Abba>. If it is difficult for us to take Jesus seriously and to live this out as Jesus lived it, it is because we have not yet had the experience of God as our,<Abba>. The experience of God as our<Abba> was the source of Jesus's wisdom, His simplicity, His confidence and His radical freedom. *Without that it is impossible to understand why and how He did what He did.*

The experience of paternity in particular in its passive connotations, is first of all, an awareness of having an origin: that of being from Someone

⁷ Memorial 13.2

⁸ *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 20,7.

beyond ourselves. Thus it means two things: that we do not have in ourselves the reason for our existence, and that we receive it as a gift from One who precedes us. "To be a Son means to receive life and to receive oneself in it" (Mr. Henry). Jean-Marie defined this most radical reality in these words:

It is from the hand of our heavenly Father that everything comes.⁹

To be a son is to be, above all, object of a donation-donation that is not so much a question of food or housing as in the care of the brothers and so the most important aspect of this donation, without which the condition of his son would not be complete, entails that allow him a spiritual space for his own development. To call God "fathe" is to arrive at the depth of ourselves, depth where we lose our foothold, a bottomless depth, "and events at this from where came out, I do not really know from where, the flood that I dared call my life"¹⁰

And in this experience of being a son loved by a father-mother God, there is nothing exceptional that we need to do. It is not a question of strenuous efforts of the will: it is enough to accept it to let ourselves be attracted, to allow our ego to decrease so as to arrive at pure simplicity.

"To expose our needs and our miseries to our father in heaven with humble confidence. To make no violent efforts in prayer to raise us to high considerations: when he calls us and attracts us we only have to follow the appeal of his grace, to go to him with this simplicity of a little child who lets himself be led by his hand"¹¹.

Two important points flow from this text, points characteristic of the life of Jean-Marie de la Mennais the connaturality within the person and the off centring of the subject towards the centre of gravity which the love of God produced in him. In other words it means: to move our love from ourselves to centre it purely on God: to follow the trace of His grace that attracts us to give up the images and the words which without meaning to, tend to im-

⁹ *Memorial*, 84

¹⁰ Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu divin*, Seuil, Vol.4, Œuvres complètes, 1957, p. 75

¹¹ *Memorial*, 18-19

prison the overflowing reality of God; and to go like a child, simple trustful, without making any effort to follow the way, simply led by His hand.

One can rightly say "the despair that invades human beings comes from a lapse of memory of their condition as son"¹². To answer to this despair the psalmist wrote "*even though my father and my mother abandoned me, the Lord will receive me.*" In order not to fall into nonsense, that spring from which the river of life of the Son proceeds, needs to be connected to the inexhaustible source of life, of God, of beauty, so fully guaranteed by God. It is such a need that is expressed in the designation of God as Father-mother. This name is obviously based on the experience of God par-excellence. The name of father-mother is the proper name for God.

The designation of God-mother is a concept that appears even in the Old Testament as a metaphor for God. It indicates a radical, tender, and unconditional love, expressed in primarily maternal attitudes and gestures. If sometimes the relations between Yahweh and His people are expressed in the legal tones of a covenant, at other times they are expressed in attitudes similar to those of the mother towards her child. As for example, the accounts God asked his people for moves from a formula of judgement, to the expression of an extreme, poignant pain of a mother who shows her un-failing love.

“When Israel was a child I loved him, out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called the further they went from me. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms I led them with bonds of human kindness, with bands of love I fostered them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. How can I give you up Ephraim how can I give you up O Israel my heart is overwhelmed my compassion is warm and tender.(Hosea 11)

The majority of people who looked deeper into the life of Jean-Marie and commented on his characteristic features underline talents of an entrepreneur, his gifts as an organiser, his capacity to manage. They sometimes use strong images;(*pirate, iron courage, restorer of Christianity*)however we have to admit that although these features are true, his spiritual life on the other and was very much marked by expressions full of simplicity and spiritual affection. In many of Jean-Marie's formulas of prayer and in his

¹² A. Gesché, *Dieu pour penser le Christ*, loc. cit., p 218, n.1

spiritual thoughts, we can detect highly emotional prayer, charged with maternal tones: the loving care of God-Providence as a wing that shelters, the hand that helps us to rise and guides us, a heart that enfolds and calms.

This concept of God reaches surprising summits of daring. In this passage, for example, where, commenting on Psalm 100, he even affirms that the essential desire of God is to reveal His mercy. He feels loved by God, a God who is source of love because his vocation is to love,

“And we are still His people the sheep that are led by His hand .He will hear our moanings because He is full of kindness, tenderness and compassion for those who call upon him. According to the beautiful thought of St John Chrysostom, he wishes to beget us in his mercy with the same love that a woman in labour waits for the moment of her delivery”¹³.

As shocking as that may appear and indeed may be, the important moment when I experienced God as Father-mother was at the death of Mary, our first daughter. We had been expecting it for a long time. We had so many hopes for her... And all of a sudden something unexpected and incomprehensible happened that upset our life... How can the God of life allow that to happen?

Everything changed I had to give up my understanding of God. He is beyond images, beyond any idea that I had of Him. I had to let God be God.

And in my pain, I felt myself mysteriously incomprehensibly, looked at, filled, accompanied, loved, cared for, overwhelmed with his presence. There was a power that enveloped me and accompanied me.

I felt that God suffering in me even more than I was suffering. He was beyond my narrow concepts. He brought back confidence into my heart.

¹³ Mandate of Father, capitular vicar, 1815.

c- Shaped by him

“Grant to our tired bodies, O Lord the rest that they need and may the **seeds of the kingdom** that by our word **we have sown** today germinates and grow into the harvest of eternal life.” This liturgical prayer and many others have similar expressions. Wrongly understood these prayers bring back to us the images of busy workers toiling day after day and of the kingdom of God as a vast field fertilised by our sweat.

(According to the true meaning of the biblical expression, the kingdom of God is God himself, God himself considered from the point of view of His action in this world and in history.)

Faced with this idea, what can we do, the gospel speaks words of the kingdom-the work of God in this world and in human history as a seed that a man sows: "he sleeps during the night and gets up in the morning and the seed germinates, grows without knowing how . The Earth produces the crop all by itself, first the stalk, then the ear, then the grain (Mk 4. 26-29)

Again we see "a change of direction": it is not we who work for God it is He who works in us for us. Our sole work consists in accepting his action, opening wide our spirit and our will so that we might be lifted up by his power

Other expressions like "extending the kingdom", "building the kingdom"..can call to mind pictures and ideas suggesting feverish work on our part, or that we can consider ourselves as aggressive managers, or as qualified and creative architects. It is good to listen to a Jewish prayer as expressed in Psalm 126

"Unless the Lord builds the house in vain do the labourers toil,. Unless the Lord guards the city , in vain do the watchmen keep vigil. In vain is your earlier rising, in vain is your late retiring, eating the bread of anxious toil.

Who in his youth believed that his own efforts and enthusiasm would make him a perfect observer of the law; but upon reaching adulthood, he realised that all the good he finds in his life is the work of God. Who's love

faithful and freely given has enveloped him, a love which gave him the air he breathes while he sleeps.

Maybe we do not listen to the experience of this Jewish believer, until we turn away from our own dreams of power and efficiency. That would be a privileged moment for our spiritual life because it would bring us to a crossroads:

- We could turn along the road to discouragement and scepticism. If we choose this route we would probably end up in the depth of depression or bitter and twisted.
- Or we can adopt a certain "childishness", meaning we stop being concerned with our own success and instead open ourselves to the astonishing contemplation of what God is capable of if we allow him to work in us, this is the wise choice of he who understands that fidelity does not consist in doing great things but rather in "just being with" the Son.

To say that Jean-Marie was a man of action is more than an expression. It is a portrait that displays vital energy and deep spirituality. Since his youth he has been able to perceive desperate needs. He had a global vision of society and of the church, a vision that led him to give himself wholeheartedly. And while preparing for the priesthood, he devoted himself to teaching, and, once ordained, as a parish priest he became at the same time involved in the ecclesiastical college. He fulfilled 1001 personal tasks, spending time in the confessional and in spiritual accompaniment. People often asked him to preach missions in the surrounding parishes. He devoted hours to personal study and reflection. He animated many youth groups.

But so much work could drain the energy and narrow the horizon of someone. There was a period in his life when in his correspondence there appears a series of reflections that perhaps, point to a situation of extreme exhaustion, depression and loss of the vitality that had always characterised him, even in times of great difficulty. In fact these are the thoughts that ran through his letters at this time.

"I never tire of repeating *Adhuc modicum! Still a little more time*, and then, there will be no more time. Still a short time then we will all be joined together in the heart of our heavenly. Father *Adhuc modi-*

cum! Toedet vivere, (to me To live is to be unhappy! I say this from the depth of my heart, and again I repeat it: when will I enter into the joy of my God? *Toedet me vivere* O eternity, eternity!

Toedet me vivere in mundo et conversare cum creaturis (to live in the world to deal with people this is a burden) Oh men, go away, leave me alone with my God... Come my dear child let us go quickly to heaven. *Toedet me vivere* “(sur le ciel,S. IV1286ss)

This letter was written at a time of great turbulence: the death of his brother Louis-Marie, the family's bankruptcy, a nervous disease, his own lung problems... To these external circumstances can also be added the forced rest at La Chesnaie, being obliged to stop his parish work and the concerns about not being able, through his frailty, to continue all the projects that he had been planning. These projects have broken out like a rempest on the evening of November 13th 1807, between 4.00 and 5:30 in the shape of a "torrent of vague ideas".

He attempted to give some meaning to his work and his involvement. This painful experience would be a turning point in his thinking and in his life, the cornerstone that would enable him to live interiorly all his numerous external activities. He would have to discover that it was not: he who thinks, who meditates, who seeks, who works, but God Himself who works in him and uses him.

"What I am sure of is that the best of all remedies is to place our will gently in God's will, for us He thinks thoughts of peace for us He **meditates in our poor wretched heart** with thoughts of love".¹⁴

The fact of knowing that God works in us gives rise to an expectation born from hope and not from despair, from faith and not from discouragement, from humility and not from the claim to control our life and our future.

"I see with sorrow that you are inclined to discouragement and that is pointless. I expressly recommend to you to do all that depends on you to revive your confidence. That confidence should not be founded on your own merits, your capacities, and your natural insights but on God who likes to use the weakest and most humble instruments. Be

¹⁴ To M Brute de Remur, De ce monde-ci, August 16th 1807

assured that he will never abandon you and consider any contrary thoughts as a very dangerous temptation"¹⁵ .

Our permanent temptation (even if we often consider it a virtue) consists in intervening, making, deserving, achieving..., with the secret conviction that prayer, spiritual life, personal safety and that of the world, finally all our business, is something which depends exclusively on our own initiative, efforts, dedication. Without the inner experience that "God Alone is enough", we will let ourselves be carried away by our compulsive feverish ego. We will reinforce our conviction that it is through our own power that we become effective and important. Consequently we will act with the self-sufficiency of the one who counts on himself alone and thus closes the door to God's grace constantly being offered as beyond our merits or talents.

Our efforts should rather be directed towards cultivating availability, the interior emptiness of self, a true knowledge of our own abilities, so that they become transparent before God, from whom they come.

Simone Weil formulated that idea in a very expressive way by making use of a new image,

"There are people who have tried to raise the soul as a man jumping continuously with his feet together in the hope that by jumping higher and higher everyday one day he will not fall down any more and reach the sky. Thus occupied, he cannot even look at the sky. As for us, we cannot take even a step towards heaven-the vertical direction is beyond us. But if we stare at the sky for a long time, God comes down and takes us with him, he lifts us up so easily. As Eschile said: "what is divine is without effort". There is in salvation a concept more difficult than the sum of all our efforts".¹⁶

In one of Grimm's fairy tales there is a contest of strength between a giant and a small tailor. The giant launched a stone so high that it takes a very long time before falling down. The small tailor released a bird which does not fall down. Whatever does not have wings always ends up falling down.

¹⁵ To Br. Ambroise Le Haiget, Paris, December 14, 1823.

¹⁶ . S. Weil, *L'Attente de Dieu*, La Colombe Paris 1950 p191)

To move away from ones self, to accept being instruments of God's actions, such is the attitude that it Jean-Marie recommended to his brothers

“You see that your mission was very successful. But do not take all the merit for yourself. Always remember that God likes to use the most miserable instruments so that it would be obvious to all that He is the sole author of the good achieved by his poor creatures.”¹⁷

Madeleine Delbrel Elayne A mystic of the 20th century said “*Lord if you are everywhere how is it possible that I could be anywhere else?*”. Almost always this elsewhere towards which we escape is that of our unrestrained activism which gives us a feeling of importance. When we undertake 101 activities, these activities may be at the service of God but obviously, they do not always make his kingdom come.

Of course we must do things for Him, we must desire him, and seek Him, but we should admit that there are more important things: to answer His desire, to remain always ready, to come out of our hiding place and allow Him to find this.

Thus the need for a humble heart, and humble eyes. to perceive his word carried out through us. The “grace of the Gospel” consists in living our lives with all the initiative, all the efforts and all the zeal that it may require and at the same time, to live them as a gift that is given to us.

Also Jean-Marie refused the advice of the priest Fr. Blanc that he should publish an article in the newspapers, to make known, all the work of the brothers in the missions, for the greater benefit of the church in France.

“Mr Blanc wanted me to write in the newspapers about the departure of my brothers for Guadeloupe. I do not want this, God's work grows only in the shade and it is during the night that the dew falls from the sky. So see how small plants just like me struggle under the scorching rays of the sun”¹⁸.()

And JeanMarie would react in the same way when he had to deal with officials. He would be forceful in asking and in claiming their rights for his Brothers and his schools, but on the other hand he would always remain silent, in absolute discretion even to being scrupulous, when he was obliged

¹⁷ To Br. Herve Monnerais. St Brieuc, July 24th 1847.

¹⁸ To Mlle de Luciniere Ploermel, January 8th 1838.

to discuss his achievements, conscious of being merely an instrument, knowing that it was God who worked through it.

“Besides I acknowledge that I have a great reluctance to speak about the works of which God made me an instrument. It is because the glory received from men can only be harmful. This attitude is not only upon the truth of faith it is even a truth learned by experience. This is why I beg of you very urgently to publish nothing of what I have written to you, nor to distribute copies to anyone. Just simply read my report: perhaps even that is too much”.¹⁹

We see the deep conviction that “we are shaped by God” and that our main work consists in opening ourselves to his spirit. Such a conviction is acquired only by **experience**.

Jean-Marie experienced difficult moments when he was writing, the book entitled “*The Tradition of the Church on the Institution of Bishops*” with his brother Feli: he spent long hours in research, discussion and note taking. The urgency of the publication was tempered by times of rest necessitated by his sickness. The book had to be published in secret because of police harassment. And it forced his brother to flee to England.

Jean-Marie made these notes after the publication: Gods hand sustained us . It was His work.

“Several times totally exhausted, I was about to stop work and go to sleep like a traveller seized by deathly cold in the middle of a snow storm. But finally, God’s hand raised me, pushed me, supported me. And the two brothers relying on one another, finally successfully achieved what they were aiming for.”²⁰

Another text reflects the same thinking of JeanMarie like a conviction that structured his life. It is important to put it in context.

(the letter was addressed to the same person, Brute de Remur Jean-Marie's closest friend, this letter was written 20 years after the former. Brute de Remur was now Bishop in the United States. He arrived in France just as Feli was condemned by Rome. Suspicions around the name of La Mennais were widespread. At one time Brute criticised his

¹⁹ To M. Rendu, Ploermel, June 18th 1844.

²⁰ To Brute de Remur, St. Briec, June 18th 1850.

close friend Jean-Marie for his great leniency towards his brother Feli. In the midst of charges and reproaches, he pointed out to him that the rule of the brothers had not received the approval of the bishops in Brittany. Jean-Marie answered him with serenity and humility, that there was indeed an approval written by one of the bishops and a verbal one given by the others and that it had been agreed with them that a written approval would come only after the rule was finalised.)

"Pray the good Lord that he may guide me in this work (to complete the Constitutions of our congregation of Brothers), and that he consolidates all the good that I did for his glory. Ah! If I had not put my hope in it, and in him alone, I would not have any real hope! Obstacles of every kind surround me, often my courage ebbs. Your poor Jean is really quite a poor fellow. (As above A11 199)

We are gifted

Cared for by Him

Loved by Him

Fashioned by him

We have only to open the door to the one who knocks

**Behold, I stand at the door and knock.
If anyone hears my voice and opens the door
then I will enter his house and dine with him,
and he with me (Ap 3,20)**

"Write to the angel of the community which is busy distracted and somewhat deaf"

here are the words of one whose name is the Word of God, who's voice sounds like the roar of mighty waters.

"I know how you at, I know you desire to work for the glory of God and for a more caring world. You get up early and go to bed late you amass efforts and fatigue you go to meeting after meeting, you define aims and objectives and devise strategies, you establish groups and attempt to convert your talent into treasures for the kingdom.

But then you run the risk of believing that all this work is down to you and that makes you tense and overworks so that when someone unknown knocks on your door you do not hear it. By working so hard for the Lord you are not able to sit quietly beside him to remain calm and peaceful in his presence. You are anxious about what to do, to offer to suffer or to sacrifice in his name. On the other hand, you neglect what he expects most from you that you passionately entrust everything to him, that you need nothing more to obtain his love since you have already found grace near the One who is for you. "both father and mother." His love is offered unconditionally beyond anything that you can do for him.

And if the Lord is knocking on your door it is because he wishes to dine with you; the first thing you have to do is to believe in what looks incredible, that His desire for communion and intimacy is always greater than your own: that for him, your presence is a gift, that he has plans and initiatives, as well as words to guide you. So the best thing that you can do is to open your door and welcome him. And with him the homeless of this world who also wait outside your door will enter your heart.

He who conquers will walk with you in the garden in the evening breeze, and I will give him the fruit of the tree of life to eat. And at the close of the day I will be beside him in his house and we will eat together. Whoever has ears. Let him listen to what the Spirit says to the Churches.(vv11)

2) A BASIC ATTITUDE: GRATITUDE

In his novel "*diary of a country Priest*", George Bernanos makes the priest of Ambricourt say, in a clear and calm voice. "*All is grace.*" These are words that the author borrows from Theresa of Lisieux to put them on the lips of the priest.

In these simple words the most fundamental attitude of Christian life finds its deepest meaning. *All is grace.* And if all is grace, then all our life must be an act of thanksgiving. Shaped by the belief that everything is given, received as a gift our life comes from God.

An author makes God say in the style of Charles Peguy's style

“enter in my night as in my house;
and if, despite everything,
you must offer something to me,
make it initially an act of Thanksgiving,
for all the service that I have rendered you,
for the innumerable benefits I bestow upon you daily,
benefits that even today I give you,”²¹

If I am fully conscious that all that I am, and all that I have, I received from the Father, the Source, then at the same time I feel that all is grace, that everything has been given to me, that even my plans are a grace from "the father of light (Jn 1, 17) "I can do anything in the One who strengthens me" (Phil 4, 13), in Him who gives me life and strength. When I experience my weakness, I discover that my roots are much more solid and stronger than they would be if they were planted in my own being. I cannot stand by myself; it is *Abba* our Father who upholds me

²¹ Raimon Panikkar, *La Plénitude de l'homme : une christophanie*, Éditions Siruela, 2004, p 133.

Jean-Marie would say the same thing to youth groups. ("*Congregations*"). That he started in the parishes. In an instruction on the first commandment of God, he explained in simple words that there are two ways to arrive at the Christian experience of God, the experience of grace ("God is the source") and in a paradoxical way, the experience of our own existence. ("Our misery and our nothingness"). It is from this experience that our feelings of thanks naturally flow.

"Though still young, my dear children, do you not understand that since Our good Lord is the source and master of all things. The best way to obtain favours we wish for so much is to give back to Him who is the source of the statements of continual thanksgiving for what he has already given us, and to express in his presence the humble admission of our misery and our nothingness?"²²)

a-The power of Thanksgiving

In all his letters, St Paul explained in brief words, with powerful emphasis, Christian living as an existence recognising God's gift: *I give thanks* to my God continually on your account for the *grace of God* bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you are enriched by Him in all speech and knowledge.(1 Cor 1,4-5)

But in this letter to the Colossians that puts before our eyes how our life would be, if lived in the spirit of grace. In addition to the term grace (charis in Greek) St Paul uses two other verbs of the same root *eucharistein* (to give praise) and *charizein* (to give grace, to forgive).

1-Grace

First of all, the word grace expresses the new situation in which the Christian finds himself by his entry of God's love, into his life, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. From this experience, a new awareness is born that of being forgiven, of being freely brought a new situation beyond anything that we could merit or expect. All these expressions that we find in the letter to the Colossians invoke the situation of *received grace*.

Thanks and peace to you from God our Father (Col1,2)

²² Sermons I,p132

This is what we have summarised in the first part of this article: **the awareness of the gift of God.**

2- Returning grace- gratitude

Next from the experience of grace is born, the need to show gratitude (*eucharistein*)

Jean-Marie was deeply influenced by the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola, through the congregation of the Fathers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, founded by Fr Picot de Cloriviere, to which he had belonged for a time. He was therefore familiar with the texts of the *Exercises* where it is proposed, at the very beginning that a general examination of conscience be made, and where St Ignatius recalls that "*the first point is to return thanks to God for favours received.*"[43], thanksgiving towards the One who welcomes us daily. And at the end of the exercises in th, "*Contemplation to obtain more love* », the author repeats that "*at the beginning we need to remember the graces that we have receive*"[234] adding that the "*interior awareness of so many graces* " makes us able "to love and serve Him in everything."{233}. Thanksgiving as a fundamental attitude in life is, in other words, the daily remembrance of all that we receive, of all the good thing given to us, as well as of the people we meet. Thus thanksgiving is the attitude of living "*in dependence*", not so much of what we believe that I deserve, and that nobody gives me, but rather of what I've receive constantly day after day, without deserving it or hoping for it, or even asking for it.

Nature

Nature is a beautiful gift. I consider it a treasure. I can give praise. The feeling of gratitude develops my sensitivity to observe, to contemplate, to admire and to value the beauty which surrounds me. This sensitivity develops a state of satisfaction and happiness. We sometimes have our senses blunted our sensitivity ignore, as Jean-Marie said to the youth group that he was establishing.

“God my dear children, reveals himself in his works. We cannot study nature without discovering him at every step, we become accustomed to seeing His wonders which surround us, we may become less aware and we may tend to enjoy the benefits of the creator without

giving him due praise, without even admiring His power and his wisdom which is manifest in our world."²³

The Roof, the Bread and the Word

To return thanks for life entails saying thank you for the roof the bread and the word. In our everyday life, we have a roof to welcome us, where we can identify ourselves as sons of a specific people with its roots and identity. Indeed we are far from a place and far from family. Thanksgiving consists in recognising this gift not giving thanks the possession of material things.

"God continually blesses this word which is truly His own. We must desire His glory alone, and He himself will help us in an admirable way to give glory to Him. Thus at each retreat. We have to return new thanks to him: for example you see that at this retreat the we are more numerous than last year; the house of Ploermel where we will establish our main novitiate is much larger and convenient than the one in Josslin; The encouragement and the resources that come to us from outside are greatly increased a new novitiate at Fougères and 11 new schools would be founded this year. But what comforts me above all and helps me to foresee the future with great hope is that I see that you have grown in the practice and love of your holy Rule."²⁴

To give praise for the bread and the word means that we express gratitude for our daily needs, the material bread and the bread of culture. When we lose the dimension of the gratuitous gift of our bread and our word, and we can easily fall into pride and subtle vanity. When we forget that the bread of culture-like knowledge, the capacity to guide ourselves in our life, the ability to analyse events, etc, these are gifts, we can transform them into weapon against the handicapped, the educated and those without social skills.

" From time to time speak to them (the parents) about the advantages of a good and Christian education; get them to desire those schools where religion and the bread of instruction, no less necessary to the heart, than material bread is necessary to nourish their bodies is provided, schools where children are taught the practice of gentle and

²³ Sermons I1220

²⁴ Sermons II 543

pleasant virtues that make the charm of childhood and the happiness to every other age, that is to say where the whole person is formed »²⁵.

The action of grace does not consist in giving thanks for riches, but in recognising gifts. Each day is a gift, a present. Our reference is life and not death. The more we struggle to possess life the more we will become unhappy the more we detach ourselves, the more we will become free to serve.

That is why Jean-Marie insisted upon the recognition of so many things that have been received and upon giving thanks to bring us to free and joyful detachment of self, to recognise everything as gift freely given.

“I thank the good Lord for all the graces that he has given you and I am extremely happy about the news that you bring regarding your new position and your establishment, I can do no more than exhort you to continue to give continued care to these little children”.²⁶

3- To give thanks

Finally this gratitude produces an attitude. "Which brings about forgiveness." (charizein) towards others, meaning grace and mercy, and readiness to forgive ::

“Put on then as God's chosen ones, holy, and beloved, heartfelt compassion kindness, humility, gentleness and patience bearing with one another forgiving one another. If one has a grievance against another, as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also forgive others.” (Col 3 12-14)

(The “you forgive” could be translated "do a favour." Literally)

At the simple level of human relations. "The attitude of gratitude puts a special perspective on my relationships with others. Beyond the negative things that I see in them-which is usually most obvious and most shocking, it jumps at us the will to look for what deserves to be known leads me to look in others for whatever is good in them. It means also to be conscious of what they contribute and what they bring to me. This is fundamental in re-

²⁵ Sermons II, 183

²⁶ To Br Anastase Gelebart. Ploermel, Dec 25th 1849

lations with people who are very close, couples, parents and children, friends, colleagues. The feeling of gratitude which makes it possible to develop sensitivity to beauty a sensitivity which allows us to discover the best in other people.²⁷

Jean-Marie did not want to put in his rule the "Chapter of faults.". He believed in fraternal correction but with kindness, gentleness and above all charity.

"I wish, on the contrary, that they may be filled kindness, of charity for their brothers and that they excuse them rather than accuse them. I want them to be big hearted if I may say so, with simplicity, kindness, humility, charity and joy and then everything will go well."²⁸

This idea of indulgence, of forgiveness, of gratitude is a gentle and recurring theme especially when Jean-Marie was giving directions on teaching, on the attitude of superiors, on daily relationships. "One gains more by indulgence and kindness than by harshness".- "Kindness and firmness".

Among the notes in the Memorial we find one that could surely be considered as a model of personal behaviour.

"To avoid with extreme care in our relationships with men. Any kind of favouritism. To be careful not to frighten them with too severe an expression, to speak gently; to spare their weakness-I would almost say-to respect their defects. We could not take too many precautions not to break the broken reed or to extinguish the smoking wick."²⁹

This "Active Gratitude" must be characteristic of the Daily Lifestyle of the Brothers. Thus it appears simple, but strongly underlined in the rule.

"That a fraternal love reign between all the members of the same community that each one be happy in the joy of others, suffer with their sorrows, and that all strive to seek God and to offer mutual support to achieve His work, avoiding contention, rivalries. secret jealousies, bitter words everything that wounds, divides or destroys charity."³⁰

²⁷ Jonan Fernandez, *Educar en ser persona*, p. 61 y s

²⁸ To Abbot Mazalier, Ploermel, August 31st 1825

²⁹ *Memorial*, 17-18

³⁰ The rule of 1835

It is in this context that we see the fullness of Christian life .

If we make gratitude a fundamental attitude. It gives a new facet. a different tone, to our daily life. It becomes natural not forced, our efforts become less tiring less exhausting. We carry out our duties not as burdens forced on us, as something needing to be done, and that weighs down upon us, but rather like the natural, spontaneous actions of our talents and abilities. Gratitude also makes us less” dependent on others” the opinion of other regarding our commitment and our dedication and this makes us more spontaneous more generous and less calculating. It also allows us to seek and find more interior rather that exterior satisfaction, which is always more positive and lasting.

We become greater when we live under the influence of this gift, when we act like grateful men and women. This is only possible if we are profoundly, convinced that the whole of our life is gift and grace. Giving thanks is a conversation of love. We need courage and daring to converse with Love.

b-crucial points about love

All this is so because Jesus himself was alive. Jesus considered everything from the point of view of love of God. His love for the father like His *Abba* of love was not simply an individual experience, a peak. Practically speaking this signified that Jesus was conscious that, everything in life is a gift, a blessing. He was profoundly grateful for everything, because everything was the work of his father, the work of a tender, warm and intimate God.

He spent his life at the rhythm of a grateful heart shown by his words, actions, and attitudes. His life had to be filled with prayers of thanksgiving. Sometimes these prayers were expressed in Eucharistic actions as at the last supper: lifting his eyes, bestowing blessings.

On three special occasions these classic formulas in Jewish tradition became particularly expressive and we indicate these profoundly significant and important acts of thanksgiving.

1 -Giving thanks in the face of an unpleasant future.

At that same Jesus rejoiced in the holy spirit and said "I thank you Father Lord of heaven and earth because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to little children; yes father for such was your gracious will. (Lu 10 21 23)

This text has a particular import for us because of the special love shown to little children, His tenderness, His simplicity and joy. However the context is quite different. After the end of the preceding chapter we perceive that for the very first time, the message has provoked mistrust, and that the leaders do not want him in their towns.

It becomes evident that Jesus's words provoke the first refusals. The powerful will not accept him and now He can count only on the unimportant, ordinary people. Dark clouds were gathering on the horizon like portents of a tormented future. Here thanksgiving takes on an important place. If we can see with Jesus that Our Father acts with attention and love in the events of our daily life then we are only able to say "thank you, Father!" Jean-Marie also had the capacity for giving thanks in anticipation of difficult situation and of an unpredictable future. This occurred to him in his childhood give thanks for this vocation and for his father's permission on December 3rd 1800. He lived at St. Briac for three months. "*With daggers hanging over us, insulted and threatened*". Many more examples could be given here. One particular moment when he had to change radically his future prospects was when he began to send missionaries abroad. For them it was an unknown future, difficult, unprecedented and not at all secure. And it was at that time that his prayer of thanksgiving was uttered so strongly.

"The coming departure of eleven of my brothers to the colonies multiplies my difficulties, but this preoccupation seems quite pleasant, when I think of the good that they are going to do, I base this judgement on what is already been achieved by the brothers who preceded them in this wonderful mission. Blessed be God! Join your prayers of thanksgiving with mine."³¹

³¹ To Mlle de Luciniere, Ploermel, Oct 25th, 1843)

2- To give praise in situations of humiliation and frailty

"There is a boy here who has five Barley loaves and two fish: but what good is this for so many? Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks and distributed them to those who were sitting down, and also as much of the fish as they wanted." (John 6, 9-11)

In the text of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the Eucharistic character appears clearly not only from the words, but also from the actions that accompanied them. Jesus gives thanks with the solemnity of a Jewish blessing.

And besides this liturgical solemnity, the text in verse nine suggests to us frailty, poverty, misery: of that person who had the loaves and fishes, it was not a child (*feed*) but a kid (*paidarion*); the loaves of bread were not made of wheat but Barley, and the fish was not fresh from the lake (*ichthus*) but dried perhaps salted (*opsarion*).

It is a picture of personal vulnerability, of poverty of means and of lack of human resources. What a convenient time to bless the Lord from whom all good comes who gives meaning to our lives.

Everything comes from God (God alone) in Jean-Marie's life. And his achievements, praised by so many people during his life, had begun in a very insignificant way. At the beginning it is necessary to give thanks to God for his help, because there could not be more rudimentary more discreet or poorer beginnings.

"I began my work in my room at St Brieuc with two young Bretons who hardly spoke any French and who knew no more than I what we were going to do. We knew only that we were willing with God's help to establish Christian schools in the countryside where we feared that unless we did then another school would be opened. And little by little the small mustard seed became a large tree, under which today a multitude of children find refuge. *A domino factum est istud.*" (Behold what God has achieved)³²

Towards the end of his life on 19th March 1857 in a circular to the brothers, Jean-Marie recalls the events of his life and reviews it with profound

³² To Fr. Boucarut, January 12, 1844.

gratitude. It was a wise re-examination projected on what he had live and achieved.

When I think of this small grain of wheat that I threw on to the ground some 40 years ago without realising what it would become but trusting in divine Providence, it is quite refreshing after so many years of toil and difficulties to see your undertakings spreading more and more across Brittany, being established in the South of France and extending across the ocean. When I contemplate this I find myself astonished, and can only echo Holy Scripture. The finger of God is here.”

3- To give thanks in advance

In the following passage again we see the Eucharistic motif indicated by the "raising the eyes." and a prayer of thanksgiving from Jesus, Quite astonishing in the light of the death of his friend Lazarus.

"So Jesus in distress came to the tomb. It was cave and a stone lay across the opening. He said 'take away the stone'. Martha, the dead man's sister, said to Him 'Lord by now there will be a smell: he has been dead for four days. Jesus said to her 'Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus raising his eyes said 'Father. I give thanks to you for listening to me. I know that you always hear me; but Ie said this, so that they may believe that you have sent me' and when he had said this, he cried out in a loud voice 'Lazarus come out!' The dead man came out, wrapped in burial bands, his face wrapped in a cloth. So Jesus said to them 'untie him and let him go,' "(John 11 38-44)

So Jesus was again able to give thanks to the father, with foreknowledge of this saving action. The resurrection of Lazarus had not yet occurred when Jesus expressed his thanks to the Father for having listened to him. We can feel here the close communication between Son and Father. Jesus is able to "predict" God's plan of salvation.

.Jean-Marie was imbued with a similar conviction.

"After all, whatever may happen to me is unimportant! Men are simply blind instruments of God's designs, designs which are always

full of mercy and kindness for his chosen people. *Omnia propter electos*. He makes everything good for those whom he has chosen.”³³

This is why even through difficult or adverse circumstances he is able to see beyond these things the way to salvation which strengthened His confidence. Such is the message of the spiritual direction of the brothers: to open their eyes to the certitudes that you that everything will be well and that we are in the hands of Someone far greater than we.

“I know quite well how delicate your position is, and how you need to be careful and vigilante; but at the same time I can see the hand of God stretched out to support and strengthen you”³⁴

The same Jean-Marie knew that the future was in safe hands and that many of his own human predictions had been total failures. It was with great humility and irony that he confessed

“We do not need Providence! And why not? Because yesterday evening while sitting by the fire. I arranged everything. I decided everything with great justice and wisdom, I was sure that Europe would be at peace for the next hundred years! This morning's newspaper announce that war had broken out in Europe after that, how can you believe in God”³⁵

³³ To Querret, St Brieuc Jan 30th 1816.

³⁴ To Br Ambroise le Haiget, Ploermel, Dec 2nd, 1838.

³⁵ *Memorial*, 32.

It is evening and the sun is setting red announcing a quiet evening . It's a peaceful autumn and without realising it, I begin to look at the countryside, trees and rocks, caressed by that gentle breeze that brings contentment.

I say I am looking at the countryside but that is not quite accurate. There are varieties of shapes, beech trees, sharp rocks where astonishing bushes are in blossom, and the tintinnabulation of cow bells, things that grab my attention attract me, even dazzle me by their beauty.

I sense that they are there, that they have been there for years and years, but today it is I who has been there, attracted by their colours, their scent, their movement.

I experience a wonderful emotion: all this beauty is not mine but it is here for me. And the mystery of this beauty which is bestowed on me focused on me urges me to shout out "Thank you".

And here I recollect my past: my life, my birth, my family, my education.. but it is quite difficult to write "my", because nothing is mine, everything is freely given, that I have received. I utter a sigh or rather a sigh of relief escapes from me, "Thank You" it is an act of gratitude that I enjoy which is as much as I can express, it fills my very being with its resonance.

I delay on the faces and on vivid images. And I give thanks to You who I recognise. as the source of my energy and strength, which daily astonishes me. Thus when I imagine Eugenie, who in 30 years has already lived a thousand broken lives. I feel like praying aloud and saying "My God..., You..., You have always urged me onwards. I feel in that "you" the harmonious sound of Gregorian music, the splendour of the Gothic, and the burning fire of the mystics. Or when I see the face and the eyes of Raissa telling me that she had come here nine months ago already pregnant, holding another child in her hands, telling me "I knew nobody and had nowhere to go. I had to sleep on a park bench,. But it was all right it was summer and I felt that God was with me.

And so I carry on, moved by the feeling that my life has taken on a new dimension, and people a new appearance, my hum drum life has a new direction and I am filled with joy.

3-NECESSARY TRAINING CONTEMPLATION

Each day is received from the hand of God. Everything that surrounds us and in which we move is gift. It is only outside ourselves and from him that our life makes sense.

We can arrive at "knowing" these principles or arrive at "understanding" a situation. to know something is different from recognising it. Gratitude breaks through reality the discovery as a gift to me, to us, from Somebody. To know these things we need faith; to recognise them as gift is impossible without faith.

To reach this "thanksgiving" (admiring gratitude), we must develop an essential ability: that of contemplation

A. what contemplation is not.

Have to clarify here what we mean by the word contemplation. In this word there is an invitation to look in-depth and admire life and the world joyfully; but it is possible that sometimes we associate contemplation with something purely passive or aesthetic, or that we reduce it to a very limited experience in our life.

In regards to what Christian spirituality will be in the future, the words of K Rahner are well known. "The Christians of tomorrow will be mystics or will not be Christians at all." By using the word mystic, K Rahner did not mean people having an extraordinary experience of God but simply a believer who in the fullness of life makes his faith personal.

In a similar way Contemplation is not related to recurring moments in time, with special rites and in specific environments. The term might be associated in our minds with another expression that of the contemplative

life, with the associated Aurora: Gregorian music, nature, birds fountains in the cloister!.

The word contemplation however, comes twice in two important moments in the Ignatian book of the *Exercises*:

Regarding prayer as looking at the humanity Jesus: then prayer ceases to be purely reflection (speculation, moralising and conceptual speech) to become contemplation. To contemplate means to look at, to taste internally, to open the eyes of the heart so that the God of life may enter and stand at our side, to have a meal with (Rev 3,20). It is a question of **looking at Jesus with our heart.**

When reflecting on "contemplation to obtain greater love": the word "contemplation" here is "the capacity to perceive the presence of God in all things and also our own presence to God, and in all things... Thus contemplation becomes source of prayer rooted in real situations, and source of discernment of our actions in the light of the divine will, from day to day." In a word it means "**looking with the eyes of Jesus**".

No search for extraordinary places, no special rituals! The contact every morning with the word of God close at hand, and to find its impact later on during the day.

B. What contemplation is

A quote from Jean-Marie can be a key to understand what contemplation is

“Remain always in total dependence on God’s spirit, and never sadden him; be attentive to recognise what he is asking of us: to consult Him often and when we hesitate over what decision to take, ask him for this favour that he enlighten our heart .Det nobis illuminator oculos cordis”³⁶.

It is in the last part of this quotation, that we find a definition of contemplation: to examine the truth and to make choices in the light of that truth. Jean-Marie relies on a text of St Paul (Eph 1, 18) "That He illumines

³⁶ *Memorial*, p15

the eyes of our heart". Here is the meaning of contemplation; to look at my life with the eyes of God. The context of this quotation from Jean-Marie is very significant. It is found in his *Memorial*, Jean-Marie's personal diary, written between April 1809 (date written on the manuscript), until probably 1818. These notes help us to understand his most intimate concerns and the way in which he reacted spiritually.

In the pages of this spiritual diary, there are some 17 paragraphs entitled *spiritual advices*: which are a kind of summary of Jean-Marie's spirituality. He altered these lines several times and sent them to a few friends as "a Vade mecum." for spiritual mentoring. The latter quotation is one of these spiritual insights.

A further important detail: here it is a question of a glance which comes from the very core of the person, the heart. In addition to this text of the *Memorial*, p 15: "**the eyes of the heart**", Jean-Marie uses similar expressions having the same power.

"To listen to God in meditation; to open the ears of the heart to receive his holy words "³⁷

"Let us ask God, in our humble and constant prayers, that He may give us the wisdom of the heart, without which we could not understand His divine teaching nor penetrate His mysteries."³⁸

The heart in biblical language, is the centre of the person, not only his feelings, but also his thoughts, his decisions, etc... It is the most intimate centre of the person, "of oneself."

To contemplate means to learn how to see life as God sees it, and to unravel His mystery according to the wisdom granted to us by Someone greater than we, whom we call Father. This definition, expands our concept of contemplation, breaks down the walls of the "cloister "where it was locked up, and so it becomes like a public park that we are invited to enter.

This was the road taken by all believers. Israel lived this experience during the exodus; the Hebrews experienced this "cloud "which protected them on their journey in the desert. "When the cloud stopped The children of Israel pitched their tents(Nbs 9,17) Yahweh was with them, a wand-

³⁷ *Memorial*, p 18; Spiritual Advice X1

³⁸ To Brute de Remure on March 2nd 1809

ring God, whom they encountered on their wandering and who was involved in their history. This is why when, the food, all carried the marks of the presence of the One who was involved in their life, who listened to their cries and came down to free them. (See: Ex 3,7-8).

C. Reality, Sacrament of Presence

A mediaeval theologian Hugues de Saint- Victor based his studies on this frequently repeated maxim. *Omnia sunt Sacramenta* Everything is Sacrament

For believers "*in spirit and in truth*.", God is visible in the essence of things, of people and events, and it is in these things that they feel that he wants to be listened to, served and loved. The world and its history far from being an obstacle to their meeting with God becomes rather a necessary medium.

We also find that idea in number eight of the Directory of the Rule of Life of the Brothers.

"In order to preserve the full impetus of his initial consecration, the brother frequently renews the joyful offering of his entire being. He calls on the holy spirit to open his heart to the faith that makes him see the world, people, and events as Christ sees them".

While reading the gospel we begin to understand that to become, contemplative means to come into contact with reality as Jesus did and that implies not only to see but also to listen to it, to touch it, to express it and even to keep silent.

This is why the Samaritan becomes a model for us to identify with. In a truly authentic contemplation, he looked with love at the man lying by the side of the road: his heart was moved, he stopped near the wounded stranger and began to look after him. In the same way the pearl specialist who recognises that he was holding a pearl of great price and then went and sold everything he had to buy it, this should lead us to true prayer.

To contemplate reality is to immerse ourselves in it, so as to find God there. Jesus looked at the lily of the fields and the birds of the air and through them recognises a father of tender love and care. He noticed the

happy woman who had found the lost coin and he discovered there the inexhaustible forgiveness of God...

All through the gospel we witness Christ's patient dealing with his disciples. He tries to communicate to them his own experience of the Kingdom. His teaching through experience is touching, he proceeds slowly testing and provoking. He uses comparisons and examples, He uses a myriad means to share with them His way of seeing and living. He was conscious that they, and we, need all these things, like children who need to be lifted onto the shoulders of their father so as to be able to see the Royal procession or the arrival of an important person that their smallness would not allow them to see.

If we agree to look at things from this point of view, according to this new wisdom, then what we discover cannot be some reborn mysticism, but life itself, as it really is as seen by the Father. This is why to become a contemplative is not a spiritual luxury, but rather the only way possible to live this life in truth. The opposite of contemplation. Is not, what the ascetic tradition calls "activism" but something much more serious, a lie.

D. Jean-Marie: Finding God in the daily Newspapers

Jean-Marie considered understanding the times in which God made him to live and work as a time of grace, the necessity of finding God's presence in human event.

"I never tire of studying the history of the extraordinary times that divine providence has chosen for us. Studying this period of Revolution which so painfully rocked our cradle and which, I believe will survive as: if there anything more useful and more serious than that?"³⁹()

"I limit myself to this observation: we do not take enough account, in our work, of the changes that have taken place over the last 25 years, in ideas, in practices and in the behaviour of men." (To M Brute de Remur June 26th 1815).

³⁹ To Querret, Oct 25th, 1815

Every day he read the newspapers rapidly. During the meal at the novitiate of the congregation of Saint_Pierre at Malestroit, someone would read articles from the daily newspapers. So that they could understand and be "au fait" with current issues. When Jean-Marie travelled he took with him a good number of books and newspapers to employ his free time usefully. He was penetrated with the "*spirituality of the present moment*", and never missed an occasion to educate His sons to the habit of meeting God at all times with great interior freedom.

“A brother asked him ‘When I can not fulfil my duties due to some legitimate reason, do I have to make up for that failure at some other time ? For example twice this month I have been unable to make my spiritual reading during the time allotted. Must I steal time from some other activity to make it up?’ “No” was the reply.

“When you are disrupted by extraordinary or inevitable occupations, you are not bound to make up for the exercises that you have missed. Otherwise you risk missing everything”. (To Br Ambroise, 1824)

You are not obliged to make up for the exercises which you did not make, without any fault on your part. (To Br. Lucien 1831).

Here is another found in the rule of a 1825, 1835, 1851, and 1863: it is very characteristic of this Ignatian spirituality of "contemplation in action", that Jean-Marie tried to inculcate into his disciples.

"When you take the children to Mass, watch over them with great care. The attention which you give to them, to see how they behave in church is not a real distraction. Everything that we do for the salvation of souls and the glory of God is a kind of prayer which is pleasing to Him."

E. Basic Practice: The Lectio Vitae

"Lectio Vitae", "prayer of union", etc., these are various ways of practising what St Ignatius of Loyola was promoting and that he called "examen".

It is not about self analysis: "I" have done something good or something bad, "I" neglected the resolution that "I" must follow Jesus in "my" spiritual life, etc. If it were thus, we would be scolded by Jesus for having a spiritual accountancy in the style of the Pharisees: "I am... I fast... I pray... I. etc"(Cf Luke 18,11-12).

No, it is rather a question of recognising the sacramental character of our lives, of people, of events. It is simply a review of the day, to discover where we have met Christ, to discover his face in the people we have met to listen to his voice in events to sense this presence in our path through life.

Did not Jean-Marie practice this when he listened to God through the voice of

Bishop de Lesquen asking him to found a congregation, when he discovered the will of God in the letter of Rosamel and began his missionary venture, when in seeing the needs of the weakest, he relied on Our Saviour who became weak and a child in a manger.

Lectio vitae helps us to improve; in the way that we examine events, in our perception, in our interpretation, in the way that we see the place of God in our lives, filling everything with his presence and his actions. "He is heart of everything". That's a little bit like what the Little Prince says to us.

"My life is monotonous. I hunt for hens, men hunt me all the hens look alike and all the men also look alike, so I am quite bored. But if you could tame me my life would become brilliant. I recognise the noise of a footstep which is different from all the others. The other footsteps made me hide underground. Your's call me out of my den, as though it were music. And then look! Over there can you see a corn-field?. I do not eat bread. Corn is useless for me. Cornfields don't remind me of anything. And that, that is sad! As you have golden hair. It will be wonderful when you have tamed me! The corn which is golden, will make me think of you. And then I will love the sound of the wind in the corn."

The fox stopped speaking and stared at the little prince for a long time.

This daily exercise will allow our day to be illumined and to be open to the presence of God. Sometimes we speak about events in our life or different events where we more easily experience being open to God. But being

able to experience God is not something automatic: it depends very much on the attitudes that we adopt in our life. To establish a contemplative attitude is more important in allowing us to experience God than the activities and the environment in which we are physically involved.

In reviewing our life we learn to recognise that we have not come into existence by ourselves, that we have received life from Someone else, that we cannot give a sense of direction to our lives but that we receive it from Another.

It is important that we allow ourselves to be moulded by this continual exercise. "To look at our lives so that we can look at God."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Supplément à Vie Chrétienne, n° 354.

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