

*La Mennais Studies*

# **PROVIDENCE**

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## Introduction

No word recurs with as much frequency and vigor throughout the writings of John Mary as the word Providence. The whole of his Correspondence or his Sermons is interspersed with references to this reality: a Providence who nurtures projects of love towards all human beings; a Providence who works silently and discreetly through history; a Providence who shows her will through persons, situations and events; a Providence who showers him with her motherly care; a Providence who directs the projects he is going to undertake...

Providence...

On this matter, John Mary is heir to a spiritual trend that came from afar, dating back to past centuries when one talked about trust and self-abandoning with great passion. This spirituality had spread all over France through the rousing words of preachers and then it had settled in the souls of the faithful thanks to the treaties of spiritual guides like François de Sales and Jean-Pierre Caussade. This spiritual treasure-trove acquired renewed vigor and relevance in the 19th century credit to Teresa of the Child Jesus or Charles de Foucauld.

However, talking about Providence is not probing into a mystery, nor is it delving into an ideological issue or examining all the subtleties of a word...

It is more appropriate to talk about a “God who provides for all our needs”. In a way, when we have faith in Providence, we turn ourselves with John Mary towards the founding experience, namely “to be received “from God’s hands. From this source, springs the meaning of the care that is offered, of the attention that is given and the ultimate destiny of salvation which awaits each human being, the creation and history.

Starting from the Abba prayer, we gaze at the Creator as the one who has fashioned man with love and love only. He creates him and continuously sustains him into being, as he is only concerned with his

progress, strengthening him in his effort towards the most complete and humane realization.

All our being is continuously kneaded by God's loving energy which manifests itself and takes shape in the life impulse, in the desire to do what is good, in the craving for fraternity and plenitude. This impulse which spurs on towards personal and social achievement takes into account human freedom and is lived out as a gift. On the other hand, this freedom is a finite freedom as it is never fully in control of itself, being burdened with passivity and tormented by instinct. God who created us and "knows what clay we are kneaded with" goes to great lengths for our sake, focussing his self who is love (1 Jn, 4, 8.16) on helping us, giving us strength and vitality. In short, to live with authenticity is welcoming God's fulfilling and redeeming energy, it is to let oneself be animated by him, it is to act while giving consent to his action.

Living by God, such is the great discovery of all genuine religious experience; all the more so for the Christian experience, given its personal and historical character. "No one can come to me unless the father who sent me draws him to me", Jesus says in John 6, 44; "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Ga 2, 20). Such is the most authentic and accomplished programme for our life: open oneself to God, let oneself be moulded by the saving strength of his grace. Rather than conquer him, let oneself be conquered by him: rather than try to sway him, let oneself be swayed... rather than impose our will on him, let oneself be governed by him. It echoes the mysterious and clear invitation in the Book of Revelations: "Listen! I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into his house and eat with him, and he will eat with me." (Rv 3, 20) All of this comes up to mind when referring to Providence. The word Providence encompasses all this reality.

It must be acknowledged though that a flawed interpretation of the word, lengthy philosophical disputes, a variety of outlooks and courses of action among believers have resulted in turning the God-Providence into a caricature. A cagey silence has set in. "Our modern age tends to dismiss the word and is rather prejudiced against it".

It is quite regrettable, because what is not spoken out on a daily basis tends to wane for me and the others. The word has a great significance, it has the ability to create a "reality".

Cardinal Suhard, archbishop of Paris, may have started his pastoral letter for the 1948 Lent for that reason with the following words: "This year, we want to talk to you about God... but basically we want to talk about God because one no longer talks about him. He has been left out of the world he has made. He has become the Absent. How can we remain impervious to this shocking absence?"

We talk about the Providence to grasp what is essential to John Mary's spirituality and to Christian spirituality, fully convinced that the Providence may be a source of abundant life, worth and mercy, just as it was for John Mary.

When the General Chapter of 2000 outlined the Mennesian Charism, it pointed out the trust in Providence; here are the words it used to define it: *"Surrendering oneself to Providence, making oneself available and living in a spirit of bold confidence is conducive to peace and joy"*<sup>1</sup>

How blessed we are each morning to receive ourselves from the hands of God, to feel energized by them throughout the day, and gather strength and unity every evening. A life that is grounded in thanksgiving, confidence and self-abandoning gives rise to a stream of joy, celebration and liberation.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre-Jean Labarrière, Providence, Dictionnaire de Spiritualité. P. 2464.

## 1. IT IS NOT EASY TO TALK ABOUT GOD PROVIDENCE.

« How can we talk about a God who provides for all our needs? In our world - complex, chaotic, prone to violence -, how can we discern the mark of a God that is almighty, benevolent to his creation and particularly to man ? Do we need a gaze that is extra lucid or candid to venture ourselves to affirm that God is at work in history? »<sup>2</sup>

It is quite difficult for men and women these days to acknowledge and receive God as Providence or rather to welcome a God that is Providence with serene faith and joyful confidence. There are many reasons for ignoring or dismissing such belief; some of them are real stumbling-blocks on the way to faith; but doesn't our faith in Providence show that we still retain a childish image of God? Doesn't our belief in a God that provides for all our needs become an alibi for our passivity, a shameful caricature of a God Father who seems to be impervious to the pain and death of his children?

Let us listen to the distress and the wailing of a few witnesses to God's silence: the feeling of horror and revulsion we experience when gazing at a truck tipping over its cargo of bodies into a blazing pit:

*I will never forget that night, the first night at the camp which turned my life into a long night, a night sealed with seven seals. I will never forget that smoke. Never will I forget the tiny faces of the children whose bodies vanished into billows under the obscure mute blue sky. Never will I forget that nocturnal silence which stripped me for ever of the right to live. Never will those moments which have wiped out my God slip into oblivion. My soul and my dreams have taken on the color of wilderness. Never will I forget. Even though I were doomed to live as long as God himself. Never will I forget!*<sup>3</sup>

Without reaching that level of harshness, or those harrowing accents, John Mary has not always taken for granted either the evidence of God Providence. He pondered that question and he talked to his disciples who

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<sup>2</sup> François Euvé sj., *Comment parler d'un Dieu provident ?* Christus. N. 174.

<sup>3</sup> Elie Wiesel, *La noche, el alba, el día*, Muchnik, Barcelona, 1986, p. 44.

were about to live in a world that kept reminding them of the nagging question in the Bible: “Where is your God”? A question which human reasoning would not resolve but which found a resonance in the privacy of silent prayer:

*I am aware of the discomfort we experience when we have no certainty about our future; and abandoning ourselves baffles our wisdom and our prudence. And yet our merit lies in self-abandoning. Bear the delays of the Lord. Human wisdom says: but what you are asking for is not reasonable; a loftier wisdom, the one of faith, replies: Amen, alleluia!<sup>4</sup>*

There are no answers to be found in the only light of the reason, there is no satisfactory answer that man can bring to suffering, nor is there an answer to the unquenchable thirst for happiness and plenitude. In faith only, there is a glimmer of hope.

In an age when man claims to own and rule the world and steer his own history, the word alone of Providence is either suspected or dismissed, as if one resorted to some external help to address the needs one should be proud to face.

It is no easy thing to acknowledge that all is grace, that the supreme will of God is full of mercy and tenderness. John Mary had the following words:

*But why those physical ailments which grieve us, why are we constantly exposed to diseases, pain, hunger, thirst, cold and heat? How can a loving father act in this way towards his children?<sup>5</sup>*

A few lines earlier, in a writing that was meant to expose the arguments of Bayle, a philosopher and writer with whom Leibniz was involved in a famous controversy about the problem of evil, John Mary argues that the root of evil is to be found in the creation and man’s history. The evil in the world does not proceed from God, but from the limitations that are proper to all creatures.

*Bayle has provided the enemies of Providence with the most lethal weapons they could use; he resorted to sophisms to demonstrate that the existence of evil was not consistent with the existence of a benevolent God... Let me only point out that the Creator was not bound to follow a plan which would have ruled out all hardships and*

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<sup>4</sup> To Saint Peter Congregation, 1829, S VIII 2459-60

<sup>5</sup> *De Dieu*. Handwritten text cf. Sermons I, p. 129.

*ailments. Besides, I will add that as God could not create anything that would match his attributes, his creation was bound to be imperfect and way below his own perfection.*<sup>6</sup>

It comes as a surprise that this thesis of John Mary - God can't create infinite perfection - hence the unavoidable character of evil - should be the cornerstone on which the Christian thinkers of our time lean in order to address the problem of evil in the world and portray God as the "Anti-evil" fully committed to the growth of his creatures.

The Spanish poet Miguel Hernandez wrote an austere and sober poem:

*"He came with three wounds:  
The wound of love,  
The wound of death,  
The wound of life.*

*With three wounds he comes:  
The wound of life,  
The wound of love,  
The wound of death.*

*With three wounds I remain:  
The wound of life,  
The wound of death,  
The wound of love."*

With these words, he was hinting at the essential frailty of the human being, his limitation, his pain deep in his heart, his void. There is a fourth wound which goes across and contains the other three: Are we alone or do we exist for Someone? Can we trust this "Someone" or should we be afraid of him? Does the ultimate foundation of things rest on love or are we condemned to solitude? Will somebody redeem so much love given and so much suffering endured, or shall we have to resign ourselves to no longer framing the question of the innocent victims and our loved ones who passed away?

As he grapples with these questions, John Mary - like Jesus - does not rely on easy solutions. His approach is personal: let the questions sink in first before dealing with them. Why not get close to him and draw inspiration from him? For John Mary the question of God Providence was

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

a tricky one as well - Isn't his personal approach to God Providence the most authentic way to deal with human suffering?

\*Note: As in the previous file, some testimonies from people who have reflected on the theme feature in the framed sections below. Here is a testimony by a young man with its oral transcript:

"We are a few to endorse the fact that there is no God, but it is not easy to endorse that fact.

We do search for God through human beings... Or through a person who invokes his name. The problem is that human beings let us down. Faith is something you have to live from within whereas I ....

The only revelation I ever had, the only truth I experienced, is that there is no truth. The answer I have, is that there is no answer... It's unbearable for someone who faces so many questions. It's really hard, and you feel the pain because there's a void and a void that can't be filled...

It would be easy to believe in a God, it would be easy to think that there is a God who cares for you, who protects you, a God for whom you matter. But what I'm sure of is that I don't know him.

I was scheduled not to know him... He could have been somebody... He never was.... Shall I try to elude him? Never. I used to have faith, and one day I stopped... I gave up talking to him, and I waited for an answer... and there was no answer.

In contrast to this open admission of skepticism, here is a testimony of complete trust in keeping with God's loving care.

Do we always do what we have chosen to? Yes, to a certain extent... but not entirely. Indeed, a variety of factors leads us to make our choices. We may call it chance, or fate, we may name it providence. I want to call it God's providence, but God's providence does not mean that everything unfolds according to a "clever scheme" God would have decided on in advance. God accompanies our history, gazing upon it tenderly; without being able to predict its outcome, we weave the strands together each minute of our lives with what we have at our disposal: our desire, our entreaties, our needs, chance...

And we do as far as we can and that is the way God works in us. Even though there is no tangible benefit to us, let us be assured that God never forsakes us, nor does he distance from us. The truth is that it is more important to choose to do our duty. And we work towards our liberation when we strive to do our duty.

My little world is not willing to wake up on this cool morning of May. A fine mist blurs the trees and the rocks. A scent of damp grass rises in the air, which brings me back to my childhood. A fragrance of white thorn wafts through the air. A chaffinch whistles brilliantly on top of a branch and sings – what a delicious song! - unseen, undisturbed, the blackbird chatters, the robin tirelessly clears its throat at the top of the roof. The swallows twitter and glide playfully in the air, light as air. The trees lie still, draped in green; hushed they breathe and make us breathe. All creatures live and call for life to be a blessing. All creatures praise God, call for him and sing his greatness. And God lives in them and escorts them, big and small.

Blessed be God! God is, God speaks, God desires what is good to me and only what is good. And he can do nothing else, as it is the only thing that makes him happy.

I believe it with all the strength of my body and soul: God blesses me every day just as I am. Providence of my God!

## 2. LET US HEED THE CALL OF GOD PROVIDENCE.

The lack of faith in this day and age does not usually express itself through strong and hostile denials. It takes up the form of a quiet indifference to religious issues. It is non-aggressive and rather polite towards religion. God is no value, God is not something or someone that matters. We are confronted with men and women who live “comfortably settled into their “finiteness” and do not feel the need to talk about God.

What is really odd, however, is that most believers do not speak about God either and remain indifferent to his providence. They are stricken with a “virus” which Biser has dubbed “emotional heresy” and they suffer from a “kind of aphasia which has virtually suppressed the religious element from the common vocabulary”.

“Emotional heresy” is that widespread and vague belief, perhaps not really acknowledged, that God and faith have no power over this world; that they have no power either over our religious Congregations; nor do they have power over me. Such is the most pernicious and most real form -albeit implicit- of our atheism.

This attitude is not new. While reading the Bible, we may discern it in the hearts and history of God’s people. Thus the second Isaiah puts in the mouth of the Servant and Zion these words tinged with disillusionment:

*“I said: I have worked, but how hopeless it is! I have used up my strength, but have accomplished nothing. Yet I can trust the Lord to defend my cause; he will reward me for what I do.” (Is 49, 4)*

*“But the people of Jerusalem said: the Lord has abandoned us! He has forgotten us.”(Is 49, 14)*

Jeremiah and Job complain about his aloofness:

*“Why are you like a stranger in our land, like a traveller who stays for only one night?” (Jr 14, 8)*

*“God passes by, but I cannot see him....Though I am innocent, all I can do is beg for mercy from God my judge. Yet even then, if he lets me speak, I can’t believe he would listen to me. (Jb 9, 11.15-16)*

There is a lingering doubt behind those words: Is the Lord an active and powerful presence who is attentive to the causes men uphold, to the works they perform? Or is he only a thick wall of silence and indifference, someone passive and uncaring who “has a mouth, but cannot speak, and eyes, but cannot see, and ears but cannot hear. (Ps 115, 16-17).

As a matter of fact, we would not dare assert openly that God does not intervene in our life nor that he seems to play a minor role in our history or in our fellow human beings’ history. But the truth is that we count on ourselves speaking, acting, taking initiatives, making decisions....

Of course, we talk about it in our prayer to God. It’s the least we can do. We give him thanks, or we ask for his forgiveness. But we do so as if he were someone comfortably seated in his temple, as if he were waiting for our report on the state of our affairs or our spiritual growth, on how we commit ourselves to his kingdom and what new projects we want to carry out. And doing so, we sincerely hope to work for his greatest glory.

How convenient it is to deal with such a God who waits for our calls like the old crippled lady living on the fifth floor with no lift, cut off from the daily round of our activities!

John Mary saw it as a temptation plaguing man’s heart. With some irony, he remarked:

*“There is no Providence!” – “And why then?” - “It is because last night, when I sat by my fireplace, I had planned everything with great attention to detail and wisdom that I was sure Europe would enjoy peace for a hundred years. However, this morning’s paper has broken the news that Europe is at war. After that, go and believe in God!”<sup>7</sup>*

The truth is that this god is alien to the biblical revelation, which presents us with a living God, always turned towards us, always preceding us, and challenging us, always coming towards us and waiting for an answer.

Our role is not so much to seek him out as to refrain from hiding away while he searches for us; what matters is not to talk to him but to listen to him. Our priority is to let him work within our heart rather than do things for him. Rather than undertake great projects, we have to assist him in his creative drive and support his action.

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<sup>7</sup> Mémorial 32, *Anthology* page 13.

Towards Jerusalem distracted and absorbed in her activities, Isaiah had these grievances:

*“Why are all the people of the city  
celebrating on the roofs of the houses?  
The whole city is in an uproar,  
filled with noise and excitement.*

...

*“You brought weapons out of the arsenal, you found the places where the walls of Jerusalem needed repair. You inspected all the houses in Jerusalem and tore some of them down to get stones to repair the city walls. But you paid no attention to God, who planned all this long ago and who caused it to happen.”(Isaiah,22, 1-11)*

We are prepared to wear ourselves out for God’s cause, no matter how much strain it entails. But while God’s kingdom takes up all of our time and energy, there is a risk we forget God himself. In the midst of trials and tribulations we may forget who has called us and what mission he has entrusted us. We may lose the memory of the Voice, we could let the meaning of God’s proposal become tasteless to us. Or we could become so engrossed in God’s kingdom that we fail to recognize him.

Total commitment may lead us to being exhausted but it is fruitful inasmuch as we gaze at the horizon that beckons us and the hands which support us. While having a heart-to-heart talk with his friend Querret about his works, and his weariness, John Mary is well aware of the living source where he draws his strength. Referring to the editing of the work “The Tradition of the Church” about the institution of Bishops, he observes:

*“On several occasions, exhausted with fatigue, I was at the point of stopping on the way and sleeping like those travellers who are seized by the deathly cold in the middle of a snow storm. But still, the hand of God raised me up, pushed me, supported me; and the two brothers, relying on each other, somehow arrived at their proposed destination.”<sup>8</sup>*

But we would rather put all our energies into our activities even if it involves stress than try to cultivate a spirit that is more compliant, more docile. Unfortunately, we act as if we were the only person in charge of

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<sup>8</sup> To Bruté de Rémur, June 18, 1815.

the domestic affairs in the Kingdom of God, having to carry an overwhelming responsibility.

*“That is the way you are, I know you.  
You would do anything for me,  
Except give this little share of abandonment  
Which means everything to me.  
Be like a man in a boat on the river  
who does not row all the time  
As he lets himself be carried with the stream.”<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Péguy, *Le mystère des Saints Innocents*.

### 3. PROCLAIMING TODAY GOD WHO PROVIDES FOR OUR NEEDS.

In response to a spirituality which “saddled” the individual and human history with God’s random interventionism, saw the miracle everywhere, and deprived the human being of true freedom, one came to being coy over the theme of Providence. Christian life finds itself stripped of one of its foundations: God the Father from whom we receive ourselves unceasingly.

John Mary using shrewd and lusty words will spell out the shallowness of a passive acceptance of reality:

*« Let us adore with loving submission the impenetrable designs of Providence, and let us place our cares in his bosom. When it thundered, they said that Father de Saint-Martin let it thunder. Certainly he was a brave man, but I am not one of those who admire such rare intrepidity, and I only like the Fiat of resignation of a Christian. How I pity those who believe they see and feel the iron hand of the inexorable destiny which pursues them through...life and who take wisdom to consist only in following the counsel of the wild one to his child: « Suffer and keep quiet! » That would also be the best advice that could be given to the damned, and if I can express myself like that, that counsel is fit for hell and its good fortune.<sup>10</sup>*

#### 1- God, poet of life.

To talk about Providence, the symbolism of a metaphor by Alfred North Whitehead, is quite enlightening, when he defines God as «the poet of the world who with loving patience guides it with his truth, his beauty and his kindness».<sup>11</sup> Without endorsing the vision of the whole complex system in which Whitehead places it, the metaphor proves to be very apt.

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<sup>10</sup> To a friend of Saint Sulpice, 1813

<sup>11</sup> *Proceso y realidad*, Buenos aires, 1956. Also refer to the presentation, -less detailed, but comprising interesting observations-, which he makes on the *Le devenir de la religion*, Buenos Aires, 1961.

The creative energy deployed by the poet is his whole being committed to reaching the highest beauty and achieving the deepest and most accurate meaning for his poem; however, he must reckon with the limitations and the opacity of the language: scarcity of the words, poverty of the concepts, subtle ambiguity of the symbols and metaphors... Although this reality aptly symbolizes the « loving tussle» of God, committed to his creatures so that he may bring out the best of each of them and carry them towards their highest achievement. God's commitment knows no limits in itself: he does everything in his power to improve the world; but this commitment, in its historical realisation, can only be implemented through the limitations of a finite world. The world as it is makes it impossible to achieve the perfect poem God has been dreaming of from all eternity; and yet his acting presence «is within us» (Lk 17, 21) as his kingdom of fidelity, promise and hope.

God's loving plan - his Providence - his complete and faithful love, is not only a matter of knowledge, but of experience. It is not to be grasped through the intellect but to be tasted with the heart. Ignatius of Loyola, on the threshold of his «Spiritual Exercises» would say: « An extensive knowledge does not nourish the soul nor does it satisfy it, but tasting things from within».<sup>12</sup>

The first step to take is to open ourselves to the power of the grace in order to transform the way we relate to the time. Because it is there in our precarious existence that we are visited by God's grace and can discover it.

- **The past as wisdom,**

as a treasure of experience has little to do with practical knowledge; it is the fruit of a re-reading enlightened by the Spirit. We tend to see our life as a burden, or as a host of wasted opportunities, or as a string of lost regrets or we see it as a dark room the door of which we keep it locked. But keeping our memory alive in a spirit of gratitude helps us recognize in our existence the benevolence of God who has accompanied us faithfully. Thus, the memory of our heart sees through what remains hidden, and joy may spring from our most stubborn soil.

Men and women of faith throughout centuries teach us to read the past with serenity and gaze upon it as a luminous story of salvation. The invitation to remember, in the Song of Deuteronomy, is suggestive: an

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<sup>12</sup> Ignatius de Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 2.

invitation to remember the love of the first calling and the weary tread in the desert as a history where the ever-present Yahweh dwells and walks alongside us.

*“Think of the past, of the time long ago; ask your fathers to tell you what happened, ask the old men to tell of the past.*

*He found them wandering through the desert, a desolate, wind-swept wilderness. He protected them and cared for them, as he would protect himself. Like an eagle teaching its young to fly, catching them safely on its spreading wings, the Lord kept Israel from falling.” (Dt, 32, v 7, v 10-11).*

The image of the eagle as a reliable and strong guardian appears here. Its wings are an image John Mary will resort to as it reminds him of Someone powerful and close at the same time, majestic and passionate like the eagle, granting protection to its little ones. A figure of speech that he will use in his exchange of letters with his friends: “God covers you with his wings”.<sup>13</sup> “The large and small community prosper under the wings of Providence”.<sup>14</sup> Such is the task awaiting the men and women of faith: reading the past and God’s hand in it.

I found myself somewhat despondent for several weeks, so much so, that I did not have the energy to think of anything. Life is very hard in such circumstances. Fortunately everything passes, everything comes to an end, and Providence, after a short period of trials, puts to sleep all our sorrows in her bosom like a tender mother.<sup>15</sup>

John Mary reads the events -whether recent or long gone - as a token of God’s benevolent love, even in the most trifling details of history. He applies this principle to make sense of his separation from his closest friend, Bruté de Rémur, who was sent to the United States as a missionary.

*“We won’t tell you we haven’t felt any grief when we separated, but every day we thank Providence for hastening a separation which became somehow necessary.”<sup>16</sup>*

This re-reading, tinged with realism and resignation, can weave within us what we could call “The wisdom of life”; it is about discovering God’s signs, and marveling at his mercy.

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<sup>13</sup> To Querret, Saint-Brieuc, July 8, 1814.

<sup>14</sup> Teyssère to Jean and Féli, January 16, 1815.

<sup>15</sup> Autographic Project, *Correspondance générale*, T I, p. 118.

<sup>16</sup> To Bruté de Rémur, February 25, 1811.

*“I started mine ( my re-reading) in my room, in Saint-Brieuc, with two young lads from Lower Brittany, who hardly spoke a word of French, and who knew no more than me what we were going to do: we only knew that we wanted, with God’s help, to establish Christian schools in our countrysides, where we feared bad ones might be established against our will: little by little, the mustard seed has grown into a large tree, under which countless children today take shelter. – A Domino factum est istud! The Lord did everything!”<sup>17</sup>*

The past is viewed through amazed and grateful eyes. Day after day one must train our sight, trying to discover the fragrance of a Presence who often lurks in the nooks and corners of our life. How did John Mary make his eyes sharp during his childhood and teenage years? His first letter testifies to this grateful re-reading of history, of his own personal adventure.

*“It is indeed a great satisfaction to be consecrated by your hands, as it was my dearest wish. I give thanks to the Divine Providence for it, I worship her, I bless her for my bliss”<sup>18</sup>*

All men and women are also enlightened by God who opens the eyes of their heart to discover their life that is shaped, guided and blessed by him. All the spiritual guidance that John Mary had with his brothers was carried out in this spirit to enable them to discover God, within their liberty, sustaining a history of grace and salvation.

*“I know how delicate your position is, and how it calls for precaution and vigilance: but at the same time, I see the hand of God stretched out to support and defend you”<sup>19</sup>*

When we take up the habit of seeing the past with the “eyes of the heart” lit up by the Spirit, we share the experience of Israel: we welcome the kind invitation of God to build a new creature on the ruins of our past. The first task of an active faith is to believe that we can be renewed and reshaped; to deny God the power to renew us and the others is a form of atheism.

*“He needs nobody; he relies on whoever pleases him to perform the designs of his providence, and he resorts to the weakest instrument to accomplish the greatest deeds”.<sup>20</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> To Father Boucarut, at Nîmes, January 12, 1844.

<sup>18</sup> To Mgr de Pressigny, 1801.

<sup>19</sup> To Brother Ambroise Le Haiget, October 2, 1838.

<sup>20</sup> To Bruté, Autographic Project, *Correspondance générale*, T I, p. 89.

And thus we should learn to read the history of our family, of our own Congregation, pondering over its heroic deeds and also with serenity on its weaknesses and errors, not so much with the censorious gaze of the Pharisee, but rather with the gaze of the publican who fraternizes, excuses and doesn't feel "better than his fathers". Indeed, viewing the past as a luminous sign within a clay vessel kindles mercy and fraternity in our heart. And this memory helps us live the present and save our future.

*"I think of the tiny grain of mustard seed that I planted in the ground forty years ago, not knowing what it would become. But with the protection of Divine Providence, and after so many years of toil and trials, it is gratifying today to see your work developing more and more in Brittany. And, after establishing itself in the southern part of France called Midi, it is spreading overseas. On seeing this, I cannot but cry out with the Scriptures: "Yes, there is the finger of God!"<sup>21</sup>*

- **Let us make the most of the present time.**

It is there that everything is played out for us, not mentally, neither through our intentions, nor through our desires, but through our gaze, our sympathetic ear, our heart, our feet and our hands: "When did we see you?"..... What you did to the least of my brothers...." (Mt 25, 39-40). By confronting real life we verify the authenticity of our desires, of our projects, of our decisions; that is why we have to be born again and evangelize our senses.

A confrontation with real life which takes place here and now. The evangelist Luke uses a literary device to make us realize that the encounter with God is not something of the past. He deliberately insists on the word "today" which recurs throughout: today is the time when we encounter God.

*"This very day in David's town your Saviour was born, Christ the Lord" (Lk 2, 11). Jesus can be born for us today. Today he can take possession of our life and change it for ever. With him we can wake up to a new life.*

*In a village in Galilee, Jesus is moved by a paralyzed man. He is stirred to pity when he sees him crippled by his sin and he heals him while offering him his forgiveness: "Your sins are forgiven". The people who have watched the scene exclaim: "Today we have seen wonderful things". We too can experience God's forgiveness and*

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<sup>21</sup> Circular referring to the visit of the colleges, March 19, 1857.

*peace, we can taste joy in our heart if we let ourselves be cured by Jesus.*

*In Zacchaeus' house, Jesus says: "The salvation has come to this house today". If we allow Jesus into our life, today we can start a more worthy life, a life animated by brotherly love and compassion.*

*On the cross, in the midst of acute suffering, to one of the criminals, who confides in him, Jesus says:" I promise you that today you will be in paradise with me"(Lk 23, 43). When the end is near, we will hear from Jesus these words of comfort:" rest in peace, trust in me, from today onwards you will be with me for ever."*

If our conscience shakes off the past as a bitter and heavy burden, if we stop being anxious about tomorrow, we will be free to welcome today.

Simone Weil would say: "Why worry? I shouldn't be thinking about myself. What matters is to think about God. What matters is that God thinks about me." This complete trust in God is the other name for "faith": Putting our trust in God, each minute of our life, day in day out.

*"Anyhow, let us go day by day as too much foresight would not be wise. Let us act with trust inspired by the spirit of faith, in spe contra spem. That is the motto of the children of promise!"<sup>22</sup>*

This attitude by which one makes oneself available is the hallmark of all men and women of faith in the Bible: while Adam was hiding in fear of his dark past and the people of Babel were climbing frantically up the Tower, eager to make a name for themselves (Gn 11, 4), Abraham would reply: "Here I am....", in a spirit of self-abandonment to God whose paths are unfathomable.

A fine letter from John Mary to his brother Féli, after his frail recovery from his stroke, following a three-month confinement in Ploërmel strikes us by its maturity. A letter in which he opens himself up to God while going about his works with simplicity and humility.

*"You are certainly very busy with high politics: for me, I am not at all worried about it, although sometimes it seems to me to be rather disturbing. There is nothing I can do, so I prefer spending my life day by day, putting trust in Divine Providence, to whom I calmly abandon myself. I am utterly devoted to my works, may God bless them abundantly."<sup>23</sup>*

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<sup>22</sup> To Mgr Angebault, Ploërmel, March 7, 1848.

<sup>23</sup> February 18, 1849.

To live the present moment is an invitation to be fully open to each relationship, each task and each event as it is there one can welcome God's Providence:

- in the events, in the conflicts we may face up to:

*"For me, I do not stop studying the history of these prodigious times to which Divine Providence has destined us, I do not stop studying this revolution which has so painfully troubled our cradle and which I assume will survive us: is there anything more useful and more earnest?"<sup>24</sup>*

- with a positive look at the time in which God makes us live:

*"Generally, one takes little notice, in all these kinds of works, of the changes that have been taking place for twenty-five years in the ideas, in the habits and morals of men"<sup>25</sup>*

- in the individuals, whatever their status or their beliefs, as in the case of the government who relied on him to launch the overseas mennaisian mission, which entailed an authentic "re-foundation".

"And Providence allows that it is the government itself that spurs us on to the road to missionary life: How admirable! What a noble mission to complete!"

Thus, leaving free scope to God who acts through each moment of our life, we can behave as true children of God with an ever - renewed fervor.

*"Personally, I like abandoning myself completely to God and to his kind Providence more than ever. I want her to lead me by the hand, step by step. Then I will not tell Her:" Mother, it is a long way from here and the road is too rough; perhaps you and I will get tired before we reach the end" She would answer, "My son, have more patience and more courage then. I go from one extreme to the other with force because I do everything with calmness."<sup>26</sup>*

This open attitude that is free from anxiety and welcomes God's time, devoid of repetition and turmoil is possible. Every day we can remember the words of God to Joshua as he was about to enter the land of Canaan: "Be determined and confident... don't be afraid or discouraged, for I, the

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<sup>24</sup> To Querret, October 25, 1815.

<sup>25</sup> To Bruté de Rémur, Saint-Brieuc, June 26, 1815.

<sup>26</sup> To Chevalier, May 16, 1837.

Lord your God, am with you wherever you go". (Jos 1, 6-9) Then, we will be able to exclaim with John Mary:

*"Let us progress, always trusting in his Providence."*<sup>27</sup>

## GOD ALONE

### ENVELOPED IN HIS MYSTERY, I AM HIS DWELLING.

For me God is the merciful Love who holds everything I am. I made that discovery nearly fifteen years ago:

I was pregnant with my first child. Life dwells in me, I can feel the presence of the Mystery dawn on me. This frail white light quivering at an amazing speed which I had seen on my first ultrasound scan, was protected by the amniotic fluid, nourished and oxygenated by the umbilical cord. It grew within me day after day into an absolutely unique being. From the first moment, I felt that we were two in one. Never before had I experienced this feeling of profound unity with another being... And a new way of experiencing God sprouted and grew in me.

Thirty years earlier God had enriched me with the same experience, when he wove me in the womb of my mother, while engraving my name on the palm of his Hand... So simple and so profound a mystery!

On us all is bestowed as a gift marking our entry in this world to experience the profound communion with another being... You in me, me in you... We just have to return to this earthly paradise that was our mother's womb and experience again that at any time of our life we are sustained, nourished by the Mother, and that our breathing is nothing but the umbilical cord which links us to Her...

I breathe in and I listen to my heart which murmurs through its beating: You in me...

I breathe out and I feel my soul quiver and murmur: Me in you...

And thus for each breathing I have, the Spirit envelops me and dwells in me:

Me in you...

You in me

God Alone in time.... God Alone in Eternity...

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<sup>27</sup> To Bruté de Rémur in La Chesnaie, September 30, 1815)

- **Facing the future with an “alert and peaceful” heart.**

This is the recommendation made by the prophet Isaiah to King Achaz who was terror-stricken as Jerusalem was under siege (Is 7). These two seemingly contrasting attitudes carry a potential of faith and hope when one tries to embrace them at the same time.

We may at times be tempted to shirk our duty to build a better future, under the pretence that we, limited creatures, achieve very little. God’s Word urges us to be watchful. We have to remain hopeful and alert; and on the other hand keep alive our impetus to search for means, invest our resources, make projects and implement them.

And when we are gripped by anxiety, when we are excessively concerned by what the future holds in store for us, when we tend to disperse our energies, God’s Word tells us to be daring and free of worry. His Word invites us to put our trust in Somebody that is greater than we are because our life and the life of all our loved ones rests in His hands.

John Mary echoes this invitation through these words:

*“We would not be worthy to support it, if we did not place our will into his, without retaining anything of ours. Nevertheless, we must do all that depends on us”<sup>28</sup>*

Considering the future with an “alert and peaceful heart” is not easy in a culture that is ours, in which foresight, long-term calculations, tight schedules, goals to be achieved feature high on our agenda and shape our lifestyle. Nothing is left for improvisation, it seems. To think that our future and the future of our world is held within loving hands is absurd for many.

*“To enjoy the night of pure faith, let us not try to foresee or make provision for everything.... Do just what you can or must; and rejoice at finding no human consolation, and then, sleep gently in the bosom of our Lord Jesus-Christ”<sup>29</sup>*

And yet, to have faith is fundamentally to have confidence and hope. “Faith” means confidence. Saint Paul does not think otherwise: to have confidence in God as a mystery of pure grace. This confidence makes us free, happy, kind and compassionate like Jesus. But to be a believer does not boil down to having faith. The new life that it entails also demands that we live with hope. Saint Paul calls the non-believers, the heathens, as

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<sup>28</sup> To Brother Polycarpe Ollivier, Ploërmel, November 18, 1837.

<sup>29</sup> *Mémorial*, 19.

opposed to the Christians, “those who have no hope” (1 Th 4, 13).<sup>30</sup> One believes in somebody in so far as one confides in him and trusts him. Faith enables man who welcomes the presence of God to find the foundation of his life. Hope answers his most profound aspiration.

When we confess our faith in God Father, Creator.... Lord of nature, of history, Guide of each man and woman on earth, we recognize that we live in and by hope. We hope that the best is yet to come – even though at times we struggle to say so.<sup>31</sup>

*“No regrets, no taking anxious precautions: resting gently on the bosom of Providence is the secret of happiness.”<sup>32</sup>*

Our confidence in God who provides for our needs is not simply the conviction that all the good that is done makes sense; but even what goes wrong or is bad and distorted in the world makes sense to our caring God. Our life - and our hope - is rooted in the assurance that God’s plan is a loving plan.

*“After all, does it matter whatever happens? People are but blind instruments of God’s designs, designs always full of mercy and goodness for his elect: omnia propter electos. Meditate this word of Saint Paul and try to apply it to yourself. Those who dwell in heaven and read the eternal will of God must have great pity on us who read only newspapers that are often misleading and we thereby pretend to foresee all the events and judge Providence.”<sup>33</sup>*

(“The blind instruments” do not make reference to a lack of freedom or to a predestination of man’s will, but to a lack of perspective of the human being - due to his finite nature - to discern the total unfolding of the mystery of salvation).

This reality is unveiled in the Old Testament: Joseph tells his brothers that in selling him, they have unwittingly become the instruments of God’s design: “So it was not really you who sent me here, but God.... You plotted evil against me, but God turned it into good, in order to preserve the lives of many people who are alive today because of what happened.” (Gn, 45, 8; 50, 20)

There is no room for negative views, pessimism and dead ends.

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<sup>30</sup> Cf Juan Martín Velasco, *One’s eyes fixed on Jesus*, ppc, page 68.

<sup>31</sup> Mr García Baró, « *La esperanza* » en *El dolor, la verdad y el bien*. Salamanca, Sígueme, 2006, pp. 187-209..

<sup>32</sup> To Querret, in la Chesnaie, January 26, 1825.

<sup>33</sup> To Querret, January 30, 1816)

*“And, you are also down in the dumps! Of what use is that? If we judge the future with our fears, it is certain that our troubles are not yet over, and that a new catastrophe is menacing us. Is it not better to close our eyes and fall asleep in the sweet sleep of faith, love and confidence in Providence rather than to torture ourselves with sinister conjectures?...”*<sup>34</sup>

One element fills us with amazement and wonder; we see John Mary display a quiet confidence in Providence: signs, relationships and bonds soon will emerge and mark out the path to follow. It is up to him to open “the eyes and the ears of the heart” and to unfurl the sails of confidence to let himself be borne by God’s Spirit.

He has never considered being the Founder of the Daughters of Providence, nor being the Superior of the Brothers ; founding the Congregation of Saint-Méen or setting up a missionary Congregation was not among his projects either..... Individuals and events actually helped him determine his courses of action. What mattered to him was to have faith and to entrust himself to God’s hands.

The appointment of an incumbent at the Saint-Brieuc See will put an end to the functions of Vicar Capitular. What does the future hold in store for him? What is the best course of action to take?

*“I would prefer to withdraw to the woods or to remain at Saint-Brieuc without any title, or rejoin Féli and live, as he does, with Mr Carron. These are the only three parties to which I feel attracted. Government bores me, tires me and bothers me; it is like being condemned to penal servitude.”*

After the calculations which invite him to be cautious, he views his future in its true perspective that is to say in God’s perspective.

*“Moreover I have not taken any resolution. The good God will decide on my future; he is the Master.”*<sup>35</sup>

A few years later, he is confronted with a similar situation, when he is relieved of his function as a Vicar General of France’s Great Chaplaincy. His friend Querret sympathizes:

*“However that may be, and though there be nothing changed in my actual position, I strongly share the opinion of those who think that I shall be better off in Brittany than here, and I hope that Providence*

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> To Querret, September 1, 1817.

*will favor my definitive retirement. I myself would precipitate this breaking off if I had not decided long ago to always let Providence act alone in whatever concerns me. Then, let me rest on his bosom like a little child, and when comes the time for waking up I will say to my Mother from the bottom of my heart: Ecce venio ut faciam voluntatem tuam.*"<sup>36</sup>

Something of Jean Marie's spirituality -which Benedict XVI pointed out in his encyclical *Spes Salvi*- stands out clearly:" what sets apart the Christians is the fact that they have a future: they do not know all the details of what they hope for, but they know that their life does not lead to the void. It is only when the future radiates with promises that the present can be a source of fecundity."

*"Pray God that he may guide me in this work (to definitively draw up the Constitutions of our society of Brothers), and that he may consolidate the good work I have undertaken for his glory. Ah! If I had not placed my hope in him and in him alone, I would have no hope at all in this regard! All kinds of obstacles surround me: often my courage fails me... Your poor John is a very wretched man.*"<sup>37</sup>

When Napoleon escapes from Elba Island and comes back on the throne, John Mary's position gets rather tricky. Indeed, a few months earlier, he wrote a letter in which he uttered sharp criticisms of Napoleon. But the future does not belong to him: he remains steadfast in confidence. He is willing to be reached out by God's providing love, he knows from experience how far he can go and avoid concern about his own destiny. He knows he is in good hands.

*"What shall I do in the case of foreseeable events that are likely to happen soon? My duty, at least, I hope, because I put my trust in him from whom flows all strength and all life.*"<sup>38</sup>

When we are bold enough to surrender before God our whole life and thus to journey on, our identity is "re-founded " in the One who enables us to gaze, to hear, to feel and touch reality with a new sensitivity. To have a "contemplative" vision of life is to gaze upon life with the eyes of God. Then only can we integrate past present and future into a story of love and boundless confidence.

*"God covers you with his wings, he takes you by the hand like a little*

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<sup>36</sup> To Querret, September 1, 1817.

<sup>37</sup> To Mgr Bruté de Rémur, Ploërmel, November 8, 1835.

<sup>38</sup> To Querret, Saint-Brieuc, March 17, 1815.

*child that he caresses, carries and rests gently on his bosom. Ah! Then love him well, see only him, listen to no other voice except his; let him be your All.*<sup>39</sup>

Whether they were a young couple, teenagers, young people in their twenties, or university students: they have joined groups of young mennesians. Their strong beliefs led them to choose careers with a marked social orientation. Let us listen to them:

“Talking about the future, about the way to envision the future is difficult and it may be pointless. When we opted for a social involvement, we did so as we were convinced that the challenge to take up was to commit ourselves to caring for the little ones. Our faith in Jesus spurred us on -and you told us many times-John Mary de La Mennais chose to go to the “boundaries”, in a bid to reach out to the most neglected people in poor villages. And we continue his mission.

We have been on strike for three months. Nothing extraordinary in the crisis situation that we are going through. Our feeling is that we share the same plight while still being privileged compared to millions of people.

How do we deal with this challenging situation? It may seem stupid, but we carry a deep concern and at the same time we are driven by an active hope. Didn't you tell us that we had to let ourselves be eaten up by Providence?

We are deeply concerned about the people surrounding us, people bereft of hope, overwhelmed with sadness and despondency. Alongside them we pursue our action every day in groups of formation for solidarity networks.

Hope pushes us forward because a strong conviction is within our hearts. A new life will be born out of this death if we all bring our contribution, if we invest our heart and energy. Day in day out we carry the belief in our inmost being that “another world is possible”.

We experience the Loving God and his motherly care through numerous people united in the same solidarity. (We do love this word “solidarity”). People who share neither faith nor hope, but have in common moments of life, moments that we believe are loaded with life.

When in demonstrations, we close ranks, when with clasped hands we shout “Yes, it is possible” in the face of political and economic powers who think otherwise, we feel that Somebody sustains us, because yes it is possible as “nothing is impossible to God”.

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<sup>39</sup> To Querret, July 8, 1814.

## 2- God our Companion

*The definition that Alfred North Whitehead gives of God as “the great Companion, the one who shares in our suffering, who shows compassion” is suggestive.*

Providence is the living companion who partakes of our path, our bread and our destiny. She is the companion who protects and supports, who makes herself present through the compassion and hope offered by our fellow human beings.

Here is an essential feature: Providence takes the shape of a face, of hands and feet, of a tender heart for each of us: because God takes care of us, he calls us to vigilance. Because he reconciles us, he calls on us to be instruments of reconciliation. Because he graciously offers us his peace, he makes us peacemakers. He makes us be “providence” for all those we encounter on the way, for those with whom we have established bonds.

Thus John Mary did experience the ways of Providence from his early age. He felt God’s Providence manifesting itself through his friends and relatives: his father who generously granted his aid to his starving fellow citizens, his mother kind and caring, spirited and open-hearted in the family household whose doors were always open.

*“Have you read the story of this man – a stranger to us – who in recognition for the services my father rendered to him fifty years ago paid the 2000 franc-fine to which Féli was sentenced? .... This man, it seems, had boarded a ship to England in 1790; the ship sank off the coast of St-Brieuc. From there the man was taken sick to the hospital in St-Malo: his bed happened to be close to the bed of a poor man who told him about our family whom he called the providence of the country; and without any recommendation, the castaway turned up at our house: we were having our meal, we invited him to be seated, he was given all sorts of attention and care, and three months later, he departed from us without us hearing of him any longer; and here he is, anxious to share my brother’s sentence taking upon himself the fine! – But my God, It was not this sentence I was grieving over the most! Anyhow, what a fine and moving testimony!”<sup>40</sup>*

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<sup>40</sup> To Miss de Lucinière, January 26 ,1841.

## - **The Providence of a Father calling us to be his companion**

God's providence does not solve the problems, she does not remove the suffering, the pain, the anguish and the moments of darkness, but she calls on us to be Providence for our fellow human beings. We would like her to relieve us of the cross. On the contrary, she invites us to cooperate (1 Co 3, 9) bearing our share of the cross (Mk 8, 34). We often invoke a God-magician with the power to correct a situation through an almighty decree. A childish fear prompts us to clamor to God for an intervention which will change the course of events for our benefit without asking ourselves whether it is beneficial to the others. A certain prayer excuses us from taking our responsibility. A genuine faith in Providence goes beyond fear to embrace freedom with courage.

God never stops asking for man's cooperation. If Moses had refused to return to Egypt, the Hebrews would not have shaken off the yoke of slavery. If Jonah had not gone to Nineveh, the message of conversion would not have been preached and this city would not have been saved. If Mary had not said "yes" to the angel's strange proposal, the Son would not have become incarnate. God's providence does not oppose man's freedom, she uses it as an instrument of his designs.

The Father's will is that we fulfill all our potential to be genuine "managers of his gifts" (1 P 4, 10), and true witnesses of his love. If the believer does not become providence for the others, if he does not lend his hands to the Lord, his prayers to Providence will bear no fruit!

*"My heart urges me to write to you and assure you how grateful I am for all the kindnesses you shower on our poor young people; they have all returned filled with the deepest gratitude, and they count on me to convey their thanks. Providence has turned you into a tender father for them: may they live up to your expectations and profit by all that your charity inspires you to do... You are a living providence for these poor children."<sup>41</sup>*

Deep inside John Mary there was the feeling of a providing God, wayfarer treading on our roads whom John Mary unceasingly beckoned to be providence.

When in November 1811 the imperial decree was issued which brought about the closure of the Junior Seminary, his only concern was to secure a haven for the group of elder Seminarists who were to be

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<sup>41</sup> To Mr de la Guérétie, St-Malo, September 17, 1813

transferred to Rennes. With a heavy heart, he wrote to Father Millaux, rector of the Seminary. The emotional and affectionate tone shows how concerned John Mary is about the well-being of these young recruits:

*"I am well aware of the sacrifices you will have to make to host those who will come to you empty-handed... I have thirty of them in front of me who not only have no money to offer but who even lack a small piece of bread... It would break my heart to lose a single one of these little sheep that Providence has entrusted to me."<sup>42</sup>*

He never stopped showing concern for his students after securing a place where they would feel welcomed. Thus, in the very letter quoted above he wrote to Mr de la Guérétrie, the vicar of Vitré who hosted four seminarists:

*"Providence has blessed them: you have been a very tender father to them..... Four more young men are in Rennes at the moment and I do not know whether they have secured a place at the Junior Seminary. I will do my utmost to help them with the boarding-school fees and if you could not meet all the expenses, I would gladly accept all the proposals that you would submit to me."<sup>43</sup>*

The Congregation of the Brothers of the Christian Instruction came into being answering the needs of neglected children, and heedful of Providence's promptings. And there will always be the challenge to keep alive the original inspiration.

*"But when I look upon those students brought together by Providence, when I consider the immensity of the needs of this large diocese, and when I measure them with its resources, I am moved to tears, and I am tempted to say to Jesus Christ like his apostles in a similar situation: Quid haec inter tantos!"<sup>44</sup>*

To act like Providence in a real and tangible way leads one to bear all the hardships and tread on all the paths with confidence and courage:

*"I will not forsake the little children whose father I have been made by Providence"<sup>45</sup>*

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<sup>42</sup> To Father Millaux, 1802, *Correspondance Générale*, Lettre 100, Octobre 1812.

<sup>43</sup> To Mr de la Guérétrie, St-Malo, September 17, 1813

<sup>44</sup> Sermon for the opening of the ecclesiastical school at Tréguier, le 22 Mars 1816

<sup>45</sup> To the Mayor of Ploërmel, July 10, 1831

Here is a laywoman's witness. Anything that has a Mennesian flavor appeals to her. She discreetly joins in any ongoing activity. She inspires many other initiatives. You will see her where the poor, the lesser ones, those in need of comfort, are to be found. As she feels enfolded in the tenderness of the providing God, it seems natural to her to dedicate herself to all, to care for all with a special attention to the most disadvantaged.

She devotes part of her time to them, she puts in a lot of effort for their sake, she worries about them... finally all her life is focused on their well-being. Her testimony is powerful as it arises from a deeply felt experience that is not easily put into words.

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I am asked to explain how Providence acts in me when I let myself be guided by her. Honestly, I find it hard to tell, but I will try...

More than words, it is a deep-seated attitude of surrender into Her loving hands... She is active within me and through me and I experience with ever more spiritual clarity that the only thing to do is to "let myself be acted upon"...

I entrust myself to Providence that she may enlighten me on my path through her angels as I believe that life is filled with beings that provide for me, angels that guard me and take care of me... I feel that what I see "outside" actually resonates "within" me, and I sense the unity of all that is created...

When I am thirsty, Providence comes to quench my thirst, granting me all that I need.

Therefore, when people in need approach me, I feel that without any merit on my part I am driven by Providence to answer their needs. Everything is bound up and thanks to her I can experience it.

Every day, I learn to say yes and say no. Honestly, I confess that the "no", when it touches the most disadvantaged who need my assistance, is no longer part of my vocabulary; I extend more and more my "yes" to include all those who need help. So I learn without realizing it how to live Mary's "fiat" in my humdrum daily life.

I don't know how, but I know this is how things happen.

- **The Father directs all things to the coming of his kingdom.**

The image of a God who rules over history so that all things happen according to the plan he has set is alien to the Gospel; it would be a wrong interpretation of his acting Providence in history.

The victory secured by Christ must be shared by all men; it must be proclaimed and greeted in their life: the coming of the kingdom is accomplished through the pain of childbirth (Rm 8, 22).

So the devotion of the Kingdom's workers is in the order of Providence; it does not demand that we do amazing deeds:

*"The recent and so painful losses we have suffered lately have grieved me deeply... It is in the order of God's providence that you should take all the means that caution dictates, to prolong as much as you can a life that you devote entirely to his glory: I formally demand that you take the following precautions for the preservation of your health..."<sup>46</sup>*

On what should security and firmness in the mission be founded? For Jesus, God is the source and the rock of unwavering confidence. When he is at his most serene, he gives thanks to the Father and when going through the worst moments of anguish he leans on Him (Lk 10, 21), on the redeeming strength of his will (Mk 14, 36). To believe in God is to trust him constantly, not because God would be a magic unfailing helper, but because He is always with us, walking alongside us, shielding us, as a presence who can fill all our absences, as a companion who gives us the strength to bear all the inescapable shortcomings, as a powerful love that can transform all trials.

*"But my good friend, I take comfort from the thought that God's will is accomplished in me. His hand has led me here, and it is still His hand who keeps me here. I have been assigned the management of the diocese. People show me boundless confidence and I hope I will do part of the good that the worthy bishop did; he is now and will always remain the object of my regrets. My friend, pray for me: "Your poor John is a very wretched man": he is the embodiment of weakness and misery; he stoops under the weight of the huge burden which Providence has entrusted him with; come to his rescue; once again, pray for poor brother John."<sup>47</sup>*

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<sup>46</sup> To the brothers of the West Indies, February 19, 1842

<sup>47</sup> To Father Hay, Saint-Brieuc, January 16, 1815

With the conviction that he constantly rests in the hands of Someone greater than him, he seeks to carry out his project without any external security, being calmly attentive to the plans that appear every day, without being bound by anything or anyone. With the calm assurance with which God seals the best paths. This is what John Mary told his sister and his brother-in-law, with trustful freedom, not without his sense of humor and a touch of irony, hoping to seek comfort after being assigned, at the age of thirty-four, the management of the diocese with a team of limited ability.

*“We are a team of four endowed with the same status: one of them will help me, Mr Manoir, a good man who is all devoted to me; the other two will bring their signature; a valuable contribution: Mr Floyd, at the age of eighty, is the embodiment of virtue: Mr Boulard is only seventy years old, but he is a choirmaster. We will get along nicely, and I hope that our management will be as good as can be in a diocese where there is no longer a single leader. Finally, it is a task which requires dedication: I could not refuse to contribute. What will become of me later on? I have no idea and I won’t foresee the times ahead. I throw myself blindly in the bosom of Providence.”<sup>48</sup>*

When a new bishop is appointed for Saint-Brieuc, John Mary has to cope with a rough man who proves to be as swift to run business as he is clumsy: he makes decisions without consultation; during the sessions of the Episcopal Council he is absent-minded, slow to frame projects, and prone to launch himself into endless discussions about petty details. He is keen to let it be known that things are done thanks to him. The relationships of the bishop with his vicar turn sour. Again, an open and new future lies ahead. Like many times before, he finds himself, waiting for a sign – a new “link” – which will point to him the paths to tread without fear. He waits peacefully with a serene heart and he searches for answers. He learns that it will be God who will decide on his future because He alone is the Master.

What is important is to perceive the signs of Providence and to rest calmly on her bosom, to feel her warmth, to let oneself be clothed in her security. She will point to the place and the means to serve the kingdom through human mediations.

*“Finally, the poor bishop no longer enjoying any popular support, goes here and there, seeking people to praise him, unable to get the*

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<sup>48</sup> To Mr and Mrs Ange Blaize, St-Brieuc, January 16, 1815

*sailors to remove their hat when he grants them his blessings. Here is the situation as it is: I wait patiently, and I will wait as long as possible, for I must not hurry to overturn, through my departure, so many useful establishments which the divine Providence has raised with my hands*<sup>49</sup>

To discern the project of Providence, her mysterious step, is not basically a theological issue. You discover it through the action of the Spirit. This project is made for us present through His Word, through the events, in the voice and the eyes of the poor, in the children and the youths who call for vigilance and attention. All that happens has the flavor of a providing God. John Mary passed on this message repeatedly to the brothers with the theological undertones of the nineteenth century.

*“Indeed, My Brothers, since we are convinced that there is a sovereign and kindly Providence who directs all events, who presides over all that is happening on the earth, we must recognize Her hand everywhere; therefore we cannot dispute the fact that everything that befalls us, She permits it and She ordains it for our sanctification, for our eternal happiness.”*<sup>50</sup>

Feeling the warmth of Providence while we endeavor day in day out to open ourselves to the kingdom demands that we often change our plans and projects; the path of life is drawn day after day and our God is not averse to surprise and novelty.

John Mary was the first to experience the sovereign and benevolent Providence whom he preached to his brothers. Through unexpected paths –confusing events –, he will devise new ways, change projects, widen his horizon.

He never contemplated founding a congregation of Sisters. The small kernel of young ladies devout and selfless whom he had resolutely helped in Saint-Brieuc would have become a community linked to the Society of the Daughters of Mary’s Heart. But an untimely intervention from the bishop who was anxious to strip them of their property will bring John Mary to heed the voice of Providence and become a Founder.

He suffers from the scheming aimed at removing his ownership of the house, but he is even more grieved at the sight of the women, alone, harassed, threatened. That is why he writes to the Superior General of the Society of the Daughters of Mary’s Heart:

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<sup>49</sup> To Querret, St-Brieuc, May 8, 1821

<sup>50</sup> Sermons,II, 405,p 1972

*“The young ladies who govern the House of the Providence, knowing that they were close to losing me, and eager to strengthen their establishment, thought it wise to convert it without delay into a religious community, and take the appropriate measures for its formal authorization; this counteracts the regulations of the Society and changes entirely my early projects; but I may perceive in these adverse events which prevent their execution a distinct view of Providence, and I let myself be directed by Her.”<sup>51</sup>*

He feels the calling of God who asks him to change completely his scheduled routes, and the horizons he has set himself personally. Through the people’s voice and opaque events, God calls and directs, reveals himself and opens new paths.

The image which inspires this testimony is lacking. Two feet on a rope curved by the weight; the steps of a tightrope walker. The feeling of dizziness. The tension in the gesture, the wrinkled brow, the gaze turned to the horizon... all of that does not appear. The testimony unveils the heart.

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#### ADVANCING ON A LOOSE ROPE

There is no denying it is a great act of confidence. But do I really have confidence? Do I live experiences of trust which push me beyond what I can imagine? If what appeals to me in modern society is to make my own decisions, without anybody meddling in them, I venture to think that I need to exert myself more on this field of trust.

What nurtures in me this attitude of trust? Life precisely, the daily opportunities life offers me to put my trust in somebody, in my circle of friends or acquaintances or in God... Can it be different?

I live this attitude of trust when I feel I am progressing on a loose rope without the benefit of a safety net. It is an odd feeling: you do what you think you must do, not turning away from a student, encouraging an initiative in your community, welcoming an immigrant into your home... And yet you feel the temptation to shut the others out, you are wary of being misunderstood or criticized. These are moments in our daily life when, without any concern about our self-image, we take the plunge and dare to make gestures or take bold initiatives which make a difference between mediocrity and fortitude.

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<sup>51</sup> To Mrs De Saisseval, January 29, 1821

I feel that I am growing in confidence whenever I forgive to somebody who stumbles along: There are so many opportunities to grant forgiveness! In my mission of educator, mercy seems to me the key for in depth healing. To start afresh with each youth, mainly with the most intractable ones, those who play tricks on me, those who challenge me and confront me, those who show little respect to me and question me on my role of educator. I once had a student in Valladolid who told me on the way back from a school trip: "What I like most in you is that you start afresh each day" This is one of the warmest compliments I have received. It reminds me that trust needs those bonds John–Mary was talking about out of his blazing heart. These youths evangelize us and remind us that we also have to start anew with our community brothers. When I listen to the brother who knows that what he has to tell me is going to cause me pain; even so I welcome his words as an opportunity for growth and conversion. Providence gratifies us through concrete persons and events that are almost always unforeseeable, but these events and encounters are meaningful. I give thanks to God for those brothers, for those experiences that have been meaningful: the school classes given in a prison, the spare time spent with prostitutes' sons, the work of youth ministry, the community life which draws the best and the worst out of each of us... Through those experiences, I have lived and I still live those unique moments of contrast and growth.

Do I live this attitude of trust? ... I know that I advance in a spirit of trust when bereft of all the answers to all the questions, I progress in the midst of uncertainties. When I accept the fact that there are things that are out of my hands and when I acknowledge that I am not the only protagonist of my history, when I recognize that it is a history with meanders which involves many actors! I live in a spirit of trust when I go through failure, deceit or disappointment and even so I keep on advancing.

The experience of trust is crucial. The story of Joseph in Mt 1, 16.18-21.24a, one of the saint patrons of our congregation, is a reminder that one can progress without having all the answers at one's disposal. As if it were a dream, he can listen to these promptings which will push him towards decisions that are fraught with risks and even beyond comprehension for many but which are for him a token of an irrepressible love. So we can have faith since we love and love makes up for our mistakes, half-truths, fears, shameful deeds, securities and even our old fading vanity.

- **A Father Providence by our side day and night.**

Let us take a look at the gospels and try to discover how Jesus lived the experience of Abba Providence with the desire to draw closer and internalize his progressive knowledge. We may discern three stages:

- First of all, the episode narrated by Matthew and Luke (Mt 6, 25-33; Lk 12, 22-31) in which Jesus invites us not to be concerned about the issues of life. If your father clothes the flowers and feeds the birds, won't he do more for you? Seek the kingdom of God and his justice, and commend the rest to his care. Attach yourself to the highest good, detach yourself from all the rest.

This is a first approach to Providence, typical of the sapiential tradition on God: Yahweh - the Lord - appears as a bountiful God, God Providence who rules Israel's destiny and each man's destiny. Isn't it that overflowing experience of God as his Abba and Abba for the world that took Jesus away from Nazareth for him to embark on his missionary life? Wasn't that experience of God vindicated by the Spirit in his baptism? Isn't that difference - who is God and what is God like - that sets him apart from John the Baptist's movement?

Jesus was familiar with these marvellous words which were read out in the Synagogue of his home village:

*"He found them wandering through the desert, a desolate, wind-swept wilderness. He protected them and cared for them, as he would protect himself. Like an eagle teaching its young to fly, catching them safely on its spreading wings, the Lord kept Israel from falling. The Lord alone led his people without the help of a foreign god. He let them rule the highlands, and they ate what grew in the fields." (Dt 32, 10-13)*

He heard those words, he pondered over them, he rejoiced at having such a God during the slow passing of time at Nazareth...!

- There is another moment in the life of Jesus which points to an evolution in his experience of the providence of God his father. In a prayer gushing forth from his heart, he exclaims: "Father, Lord of heaven and earth! I thank you because you have shown to the unlearned what you have hidden from the wise and learned. Yes, Father, this was how you wanted it to happen." (Mt 11, 25; Lk 10, 21).

This prayer of Jesus has to be placed in its context: Jesus senses that the refusal of the wise and the learned of his time to open their heart to

the mysteries of the kingdom will eventually backfire on him and bring about his death. Father, I thank you, may your will be done! I know that you will always be my Abba, my Father, come what may, in moments of joy or turmoil.

Jesus praying at Gethsemane, Jesus crying out to his father on the cross, “My God, my God, why did you forsake me?”, add drama to the theme of God’s providence. God never abandoned His son, but things were unfolding as if He had forsaken him, as if He was indifferent to his terrible plight, as if He was no longer before his eyes. (To have somebody before one’s eyes: such is the meaning of the latin word “pro-videre”, from which comes the word “providence”). Now Jesus lives his trust in God within a dark night: in times of dereliction talking about a God who provides for us is not confirmed by experience and feels like deceit or sheer invention. J.B. Metz calls Christ’s passion his “theological passion”, the feeling of being abandoned by God.

How does Jesus face this feeling of emptiness, of “no-sense”? The memory saves Jesus. Jesus has hoarded up so much memory of God his Father and Father of the world, he has seen himself so many times enfolded and surrounded by his love that, when comes the Cross, this memory prevails over the darkness which threatens to destroy him. The memory of love is stronger than the brutal assault of the “no-sense”, of the abandonment.

God accessible and free. In any personal relationship, the fact that we can approach a friend is a source of confidence, of security and happiness. But when he is free... His freedom can be a source of insecurity, of fear and uncertainty, because we can never be certain that he will use it either for us or against us. The difference between God and us on this point is that his liberty and his love always go hand in hand, which means that he will never exert his liberty against us. We “have” love and therefore we may cease to have it. On the contrary, God “is” love, therefore he never ceases to be what he is. Never will his liberty exert itself against ours.

*“What is certain is that the best remedy is to calmly place our will on the will of God, whose thoughts for us are those of peace, and whose thoughts on our miserable heart are those of love. Don’t you agree with my opinion, Doctor, and won’t you advise your sick friend not to lose a single drop of the bitter chalice handed to him by the divine hand? Ah! How he would like to drain it to the last dregs, and not to*

*tire to adore and to bless this Providence full of mercy who wants to enrich him with all the treasures of the cross!”<sup>52</sup>*

This conviction has given Jesus strength in his trials; this assurance is also the solid rock of our trust in God who always provides for our needs, even though his manner of being Providence baffles us on many circumstances...

*“Judging from your letter, it seems that you are in a somber mood, and you are down in the dumps; I understand and it does not surprise me: however, be careful not to give way to vain fears : put your trust in Providence: she sometimes puts us to the test, but she is a good Mother.”<sup>53</sup>*

We are always “led by the merciful hand of Providence”; it should be our motto in the moments when we experience emptiness, when our convictions fall apart, when God remains silent and his presence can’t be felt.

*“When the Good God turns his back on us, he is no less close to us; we do not see him any more, it is true, but he is by our side ready to help and defend us... To enjoy the night of pure faith, let us not try to foresee or make provision for everything. (...) Do just what you can or must; and rejoice at finding no human consolation, and then, sleep gently in the bosom of our Lord Jesus-Christ.”<sup>54</sup>*

We must believe in a God who cares for us, not outside what seems to contradict His providence; let us meet God head-on and experience His providence. Then search for His face.

Adverse events in Paul’s life cast light on his trust in God Providence and hopefully help us kindle ours:

if we read Romans 8, 31-39, an inescapable truth stands out: the unshakeable trust of Paul in God (“Who can separate us from God’s love?”). The list of all the hardships which he had to endure is impressive: the lashing, the stoning, the shipwrecks, the thefts, the slander... to his martyrdom in Rome a few years later. On what does Paul lean on in his challenge to all the earthly and celestial powers, as he meets with suffering and setbacks? On God’s love which has been boundless and definitive with the gift of his Son Jesus. This is the driving-force behind Paul’s unwavering trust in God Providence.

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<sup>52</sup> To Bruté de Rémur, August 16, 1807

<sup>53</sup> To Br Abel Lucas, May 20, 1848

<sup>54</sup> Memorial, 33 and 19

Paul's life is filled with those events which seem to contradict the fact that life contains a mystery that is welcoming, caring, kind. Paul does not deny this apparent opposition. But he is convinced despite all these seemingly contradictory events that in his life there is something else; something so decisive, so central, so impressive which is Christ kindness and love rooted in the memory of his heart. "For I am certain that neither death, nor life, neither the present, nor the future... will ever be able to separate me from the love of God which is mine through Christ Jesus our Lord".

This argument results from Paul's radical faith and trust in God, despite...? Some theologians like Paul Tillich or thinkers like Paul Ricoeur share this opinion. This latter writes:

*"I will add this: evil is in the category of the "despite".... the risk of faith is to believe "despite"... If we question one another, we will probably admit that it is always "despite".... that we believe".*

Things were no different in John Mary's life. There is no doubt that just like Paul or Christ, the vivid recollection, the memory of such a great blessing John Mary received has kept him firm in the moments of intense suffering. He preached God's blessings ardently in his sermons. He wrote about them in his letters. The Cross is well present, as the inescapable companion of the true disciple who follows in Christ's footsteps. Pope Francis spoke with clarity and audacity about the Cross during his first mass to the cardinals: *"When we journey without the Cross, when we build without the Cross, when we profess Christ without the Cross, we are not disciples of the Lord, we are worldly: we may be bishops, priests, cardinals, popes, but not disciples of the Lord "*.

In following Jesus, in making ours his feelings, lies consolation.

*"I can feel, my dear daughter, how great your misery is and how heartbroken you are. Your family's position is cruel and makes yours extremely difficult and painful to bear. It is in God's bosom and in the loving heart of Jesus that you must draw the strength and the consolation you need."*<sup>55</sup>

A true disciple embraces the mysteries of Jesus and makes them his: the painful mystery of Gethsemane is a mystery to be lived as the trustful experience of a son.

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<sup>55</sup> To Miss Jallobert de Monville, July 3, 1814

*“May God’s will be done, my dear daughter, that is what we must say all the time, but more particularly still when it pleases God to plunge us into bereavement and tears... What would he say, my daughter, in a moment of anguish? He would prostrate before his father, adore his will and desire only to accomplish it. We too must always bless Providence.”<sup>56</sup>*

The mystery of death outside the city walls, as the heir expelled from the holy community, (*“Jesus has suffered death outside the city”, Heb 13, 12*).

*“I am in the most pitiable position vis-à-vis my bishop because he wants by all means to remove my title and send me away. He has even threatened me and forbidden me to praise God. Crucified charity is the purest, as Father Olier used to say. Ask God to make me faithful to my vocation. I finish on these words, my good friend, as I have run out of paper. Pray for me, for this poor John whose needs are so great, and who loves you with such a tender heart in Our Lord.”<sup>57</sup>*

The mystery of His boundless love on the cross, making his the feelings and the words of forgiveness of the Crucified; going through a very trying time during the mennesian crisis, he will write with pain and affection:

*“One of your sentences concerning him (Féli) pains me more than a stab. Oh my poor Persehais, on receiving this stab from your hand, I raise my eyes full of tears to heaven, and repeat the prayer of Jesus dying on the cross: My God, forgive him, for he didn’t know what he was doing! My dear Persehais, I am with heartfelt affection your most humble servant.”<sup>58</sup>*

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<sup>56</sup> To Miss Jallobert de Monville, January 27, 1815

<sup>57</sup> To Bruté de Rémur, December 18, 1820

<sup>58</sup> To Father Persehais, February 15, 1835

God alone

With God's support...

I remember, with emotion, entering the Intensive Care Unit in the Cruces Hospital. For two months, my beloved grandson had wrestled with a disease the origin of which the doctors could not trace. For the third time he entered the operating theatre; the operation was of vital importance....

After a three-hour surgery, I was allowed access to the "Holy of Holies" of the hospital; at the heart of the sanctuary, the Intensive Care Unit... I entered barefooted and stripped of my clothes. God had supported us for two months. He had been my strength in my state of extreme weakness, he had carried me in his arms, to the limit of suffering, and he had taken up our life in his hands... He had been my companion in daylight, he had never ceased to be the Presence amid the solitude of the nights...

I remember, with emotion, entering the Intensive Care Unit:

Seven children were there, "buried" in their bed, connected to the machines. Among them, my cherished grandson, who had not woken up from his anaesthesia. I drew close to him, barefooted, feeling naked, shaking with emotion... His frail arms in the shape of the cross and his side transfixed: Oh my God, you are here, in each of these children, crucified. My God, you are here, in each of these mums, grieving. My God, you are here, in each of these nurses, easing the pain of the body and soul. You were All... Then I saw you:

On each machine which sustained each child's heartbeat two letters drew my attention: DS, "Deutsche System"; but for me, at that time and right now, they signify:

God alone sustains life and dreams of resurrection...

God alone sustains life and opens it to His life...

## **4. FRUIT OF THE HEART LIVING IN THE HANDS OF PROVIDENCE.**

### **1- Serene peace in the face of fear**

One of the most recurring recommendations throughout the gospels is «Don't be afraid! ». During the storm on the lake, (Mk 6, 50), in the scene of the Transfiguration (Mt 17, 7), in the invitation to surrender to God's Providence (Mt 6, 25; Lk 12, 22), in the encounter with the Risen Lord (Mk 16, 6; Lk 24, 38) always appears the emphasis on trust. « Don't be afraid, don't be alarmed, don't worry! ». And the supreme reason to overcome fear and to open up fully to trust is God's enfolding tenderness and his firm decision to give us the plenitude of his life and happiness.», «Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the Kingdom» (Lk 12, 32)

We live in an era dominated by fear. On one hand, there are the age-old fears, fears that are more visible than ever among today's men and women (failure, illness, suffering, old age, death...). But also the current fears that shake the world (economic recession, nuclear threat, destruction of nature, unchecked terrorism...).

We need an authentic therapy of trust. Faith in Providence offers us inexhaustible supplies of confidence and peace. Through it, we learn how to nurse our hidden fears, how to guard against the anguish of the future; we learn how to stop being obsessed by material possessions, and taking advantage of our fellow human beings; we learn how to trust today's men and women in spite of everything and push further the boundaries of mutual trust.

#### **- Our living sources rest in you.**

Although human beings are limited, empty and wounded, they can live in serene trust, in a peaceful spirit; we know that God Providence unceasingly gives us everything and works for our own good. He is the source of our peace, not because we are attracted to Him, but because He feels mysteriously attracted to us.

*“What had we done for him that he should have loved us so? What is there in us that is worthy of attracting His glance and His mercy? Nothing, my daughter! But he sees us covered with the blood of His Son, and it is Jesus Christ that He loves in the poor sinners who present themselves to him as His members forming, in some way, one body with the One in whom He has put His eternal complacency.”<sup>59</sup>*

According to John Mary, our unfailing serenity is rooted in the experience of being cherished eternally by God, the very experience of the Jordan in our innermost being. In the Jordan this experience and this certainty is sealed; our being, each man and woman’s being is engraved on the palms of His hands (Is 49, 16), borne by the Eternal. (Is 43, 1; Ps 140, 13)

Jesus has discovered his identity of “Only Son”, drawing his source in God. He has “obscured” his divinity – so to speak – to become clay that lets itself be shaped, not through chance or necessity, but from the prime unfathomable desire of a God pouring out his love.” You are my Son, my delight, my dwelling where I have a place to pour out my love and reveal myself entirely, without being hindered by any obstacle”. The Source has found in Jesus no limit to its outpouring.

*“He calls us and attracts us, to follow the attraction of his grace and go to him with the simplicity of a small child who allows itself to be led by the hand.”<sup>60</sup>*

#### **- My peace I give you**

We are called upon to be men of contemplation, to walk in life with an attentive heart and open eyes, capable of discerning God in the thickness of life and meeting there the marks of his presence and his action.

*“Let us strive to acquire that unchanging serenity, that calmness of spirit, that meekness which is full of joy, peace, love and hope that has been promised and is indeed given to those who, rising above their nature and senses, see God and him alone in all things.”<sup>61</sup>*

If we discover God in our own heart, we already know how he works in the privacy of each one of us, whoever we are. The man with a

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<sup>59</sup> To Miss Amable Chenu, July 12, 1816

<sup>60</sup> Memorial, 18- 19

<sup>61</sup> Memorial, 124

contemplative gaze knows that God's love is a redeeming one at the heart of all things and his love is discreet.

*"Consequently, my daughter, be at peace, not because you yourself are good, but because God is good and he is your father."<sup>62</sup>*

One does not wonder whether God is there, but how he works in this situation or in this particular person. All of this is not easy to grasp and it is not as natural as breathing. It requires an effort to be attentive, to search for answers and to pray God with a contemplative gaze that is sustained by faith in order to go through taxing situations where God seems to be absent. When John Mary lives through disturbing events and suffers distrust and denouncing, when serious problems arise following the papal encyclical which condemns his brother and the article from "the Friend of Religion" accusing him of complicity, he will try to bring peace to his friends.

*"I hope to find our good friend Miss de Trémérec whom I have acquainted with my latest adventures, which will have saddened her more than they have upset me, for despite adverse appearances, a great blessing will arise from this: let us abandon unreservedly to Providence."<sup>63</sup>*

The words of profound peace in John Mary spring from his experience of God that slowly reveals himself to him; experience that is nourished by his faith in a God of merciful tenderness whose love is unconditional as was his parents'. This outlook is central and appears several times in his Memorial notebook.

*"A soul that is docile and flexible in the hands of God does not resist the inspirations of his grace; it forgets itself entirely and desires and aspires to nothing but the Glory of the One it loves; it is deeply convinced of God's action in all... It believes that it is He who guides men and their counsels. That soul, far from being irritated by contradictions and unduly agitated by continual bursts of impatience and resentment, enjoys a peace that nothing alters. It always blesses and adores the designs of Providence with delightful joy and tender love."<sup>64</sup>*

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<sup>62</sup> To Miss Jallobert, in Memorial 127

<sup>63</sup> To Miss de Lucinière, October 12, 1834

<sup>64</sup> Memorial, 119 – 120

## 2- Being trusting and audacious.

In 2000, the Chapter defined Providence as the key of our charisma, “abandonment lived as receptiveness and trustful audacity that is conducive to peace and joy”. Because abandoning oneself to Providence is not being lazy or passive, far from it. As I welcome my life as a mother would, as a hand guides me and accompanies me in the mission, as I know that wings shield me from the cold and the heat, I dare undertake anything with the strength of the one who supports me.

God does not want us to be put off and scared by the challenges awaiting us, but he wants us to be daring and calm, and thus to show our trust as children do. Showing audacity does not mean that one loses the sense of God’s greatness, the sense of adoration and the sense of wonder at being caressed by a love that knows no bounds. The one who is willing to let himself be touched by this love knows from experience that he can be unconcerned about his own destiny as it is in good hands.

*“If I were to die tomorrow, what would become of all that? I wonder, and my answer is an act of faith in Providence”<sup>65</sup>*

In the biblical accounts of vocation, we often see the one who is called putting up some resistance, confessing his fears and his shortcomings: Moses uses his stuttering as an excuse (Ex 4, 10); Gideon, his belonging to the weakest clan in the tribe of Manasseh (Jg, 6, 15); Jeremiah, his youth (Jr 1, 6); Peter, his sinful condition (Lk 5, 8)...

Never are these shortcomings denied, but the promise “I will be with you” transcends them and puts them on another level; it makes it possible to undertake the mission from a driving force which is not ours but which is received as a gift. Thus, John Mary heeds the call to change his roadmap and modify his early project.

*“The Minister for the Navy has asked The Prefect for Morbihan to convey his desire to rely upon some of my brothers for the instruction of the emancipated slaves of Martinique and Guadeloupe. I have not said no, for it would be such a fine and holy mission! But I have not said yes yet, as the sad objection ever recurs, where should I take enough subjects to meet so many needs, and why should I cast them so far away when I have so few of them ?”<sup>66</sup>*

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<sup>65</sup> To the Minister of Education, November 13, 1837

<sup>66</sup> To the Minister for the Navy, Ploërmel, December 9, 1838

(The faith of the Founder, his trust in Providence, the very fact that it is a challenge, will spur him on to accept the Minister's proposal and take the necessary means to implement it.)

There is a story in the Gospel rich and subtle about fear and audacity prompted by faith. The text of Mark 4, 35-41 evokes two moments in the life of faith: one moment of weakness when one doubts that this slumbering Jesus may rise and command the wind and calm the sea. When the apostles' faith was getting weak, so was waning their belief in the power of Jesus. On the contrary, the "tested" faith, nourished by the experience that God converts what is lost, kindles the embers of a waning love and makes a drained community rise; a "tested" faith remains resolute amid the vicissitudes of the existence like a secret victory over the world of despair and fear."<sup>67</sup>

It is true that frequently we respond with fear to the uncertainties, but we believe that Someone has boarded our boat tossed about in the storm and has taken the helm: He will guide us onto the shore. In darkness an unwavering faith can sprout.

*"To be prepared to sacrifice all tastes and all consolations if He were to take them away entirely from you; and to immerse yourself ardently and valiantly in the darkness which He sometimes envelops you in."*<sup>68</sup>

When we feel divided between fear and trust, we may be tempted to view reality as a threat as we hear the storm rumbling, or we may bank on faith which assures us that Someone is by our side supporting us when we are in turmoil. Either we shall sink or we will feel escorted by The One who can take us to the safety of the shore. This is the privilege of faith.

*"It is essential then, I repeat, to observe silence and wait with a peaceful mind for the moments Providence will choose to expand our good work"*<sup>69</sup>

We can walk towards the future and risk the best of ourselves. When we are short of breath and despondency creeps up on us, it is wise that we recollect ourselves to draw new strength and rekindle hope. To breathe, to inspire, to hope. Yes," hope sustains us in the midst of the storm". Providence seizes us.

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<sup>67</sup> refer to J.M. Jovira Belloso, *Leer el Evangelio*, Madrid 1980, 204

<sup>68</sup> To Miss Jallobert de Monville, January 3, 1816

<sup>69</sup> To Miss Amable Chenu, April 8, 1820

“My life was like a clear day, sunny and bright. All of a sudden, everything turns dark, somber clouds appear, foreshadowing a storm.

- “You have a malignant tumor.”

Your head is spinning, you feel like a heavy steel helmet around it. You feel that a chasm opens up before you. You have the feeling that you will be engulfed. You are assailed by feelings of sadness and anguish. Then, you hear a voice - an interior voice.

- Don't be afraid. Be in peace. I will not allow anybody to wrench you from my hand. Nobody will be able to separate you from my love. With an everlasting love, I have loved you. Take refuge in my bosom like a little child in the bosom of his mother. Snuggle up in my arms without fear.

And little by little, peace sets in, confidence resurfaces. You experience the security to be truly seized by his hand.

You wake up to the feeling that all your life has been seized by his hand, sheltered in his bosom, protected by his arms.

If God has never let me drift away from his hand, how will he let me drift now that I need him most?

Daily you experience the strength of his resurrection.

The serene audacity which the experience of Father-Providence offers us is well rendered in this anecdote recounted by Henry Nouwen: “The Flying Rodleigh are trapeze artists plying their trade at the German circus Simoneit-Barum. When the circus came to Fribourg two years ago, my friends Franz and Reny invited us, my father and I, to attend the show. I will never forget how entranced I was at the sight of the Rodleigh swinging in the air, flying and hanging on to each other like slender ballerinas. The day after, I returned to the circus to see them again and I introduced myself to them as one of their great admirers. They invited me to attend their practice sessions, they gave me free tickets. They treated me to dinner and a few days later suggested I should travel with them for a week. Which I did, and we became good friends. One day, I was sitting with Rodleigh, the leader of the group, in his trailer, talking about the flying acrobats. And he told me: “As a jumper, I must trust the catcher entirely. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the true star is Joe, my catcher. He must be there for me with split-second accuracy and catch me in the air when I am heading his way

after jumping. - "What is the key?", I asked him. - "The secret is that the jumper does nothing and the catcher does everything, Rodleigh replied. When I jump towards Joe, I only have to stretch out my arms and my hands and wait for him to catch me and carry me to the safety of the trampoline. "So you do nothing?", I inquired with surprise. "Nothing" he insisted. The worst thing the jumper can do is to try to grab at the catcher. I must not catch Joe. It is him who must catch me. If I hold tight Joe's wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, and it would be deadly for both of us. The jumper must fly, the catcher must seize; and the jumper is trustful with his outstretched arms that his catcher will be there at the precise moment."

« Joe's words carried so much conviction that in my mind the words of Jesus became luminous: *"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"*. To die is to trust in the catcher. To take care of the dying amounts to saying: *"Don't be afraid. Remember that you are the beloved children of God. God will stand by you when you "take the plunge". Don't try to seize him; He will seize you. The only thing you must do is to stretch out the arms and hands and to trust, to trust again and again."*<sup>70</sup>

"Jesus bowed his head and commended his spirit" (Jn 19, 30). This gesture of Jesus evokes his attitude of wholehearted assent to the Father, consistent with his bold commitment to place his trust in Him above all. The One who had dedicated his whole life now surrenders his last breath in the abandonment of the child who falls asleep in his mother's arms.

In contemplating the last moments of Jesus on the Cross, we can also bow our head as nagging concerns about knowing all the "why" and controlling all the "how" plague us. To bow it to "the logic of God" so different from ours. To give Him our assent, not because we know or understand, but because we want to go beyond the possession of tangible certainties. To say "yes" with conviction knowing that we are secure under the Father's protection, whatever the circumstances.

Our existence started out with "breathing in" and will end with "breathing out"; this pulsating rhythm is about receiving life and giving it back. When we breathe, we welcome his presence through "breathing in"; through "breathing out" we express our desire to empty and dispossess ourselves, to surrender ourselves with confidence to The One from whom we receive life.

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<sup>70</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Escritos esenciales*, Sal terrae, Santander 1999, 146-147

Providence of my God!  
Oh! Mother that I have invoked so often  
and to whom I have offered, consecrated  
and dedicated this House  
and all the Sisters who, by your grace,  
are gathered here!

Providence always so good,  
so wise, so full of mercy and love  
for your poor creatures!  
We adore you, we bless you,  
and we abandon ourselves unreservedly to you.

Make of us what you please.  
We have no other wish but to do your will in all things:  
in humiliations, in grandeur,  
in poverty, in wealth,  
in health, in sickness,  
in life and in death.

Providence of my God! Protect your children,  
strengthen them, guide them,  
be their defender, their leader, their light,  
their counsel, their consolation, their treasure,  
their joy, their hope:  
God alone in time,  
God alone in eternity!

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