

La Mennais Studies

Gentleness and Firmness:

An Alloy Called Forgiveness

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February 2014 N°3

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Introduction

*Gentleness is the best way to obtain from your children that which you want from them: if you scold and punish then too much they will turn against you and grow bitter.*¹ This passage from a letter of Jean-Marie de La Mennais, dated 1835, and addressed to Brother Lucien Deniau is well known. *To obtain from your students what you want from them*; that is firmness. *The best means*: this is gentleness. We learn then, from this letter, that the connection between firmness and gentleness is not logical: firmness is not inversely proportional to gentleness, but on the contrary the two go hand in hand. We learn also that gentleness is opposed to violence (moaning, excessive punishment) but not to firmness. However, firmness and gentleness require sufficient skill to avoid open rebellion or silent resistance, and thus obtain compliance with the required outcome. Firmness and gentleness must therefore walk hand in hand to compete with force and intelligence.

It is therefore necessary to be gentle in firmness and firm in gentleness. That sounds nice, but how do we put it into practice? Is ability to unite firmness and gentleness simply a skill? Is it simply pragmatism which consists in alternating firmness and gentleness as teachers so often do as they search to enchant or to make compliant those they are called to educate. Did Jean-Marie give us simply circumstantial advice, to warn the brothers about being circumspect in their relations with their pupils? It would be

¹ C.G. (*Correspondance générale*), III, page 165.

strange if, what for him was such a firm principle, as we will see, should have been established by simple opportunism. We should not be surprised to see that this is to be found in the mainstream of a long tradition, of both human wisdom and divine revelation, because it is at the very heart of the new covenant.

A living educational strategy

The newspapers regularly publish investigations based on the experience of those in contact with young delinquents. Such a study made by Helene Franco, a juvenile judge at the court of Bobigny, France, with her twelve colleagues, is one example among many. This is how Helene Franco shares her work between the educational and the penal framework. Moving between gentleness and firmness the magistrate confides: “They bear terrible sufferings”. There is no place for liberalism in her decisions, only the application of the law: *“I take into account the facts, their gravity and their complexity, their history and the personality of the juvenile.”* She insists: *“To be intelligent, justice for minors requires time.”*

William 17, appearing for possession of drugs. The young man entered the office, with his father and a lawyer, his head bowed. William was caught smoking a joint with three packets of drugs in his pockets. *“Personal consumption”* he protested. William appeared before the judge because he had not responded to his summons. *“You really need to stop this sort of thing. Where are you going in your life?”* asked the magistrate, who remembered him from three previous appearances, of which the last was a theft with accomplices, eighteen months ago. William had been working for a year. His mother did not come: *“She has*

had enough of me” he said. He smokes five joints a day and denies that he is dependent! *“I have seen a doctor. I have already stopped drinking...”* The judge replied. *“You will end up losing your job, this stuff damages your brain!”* Little by little she leads him to accept the idea of medical help. She adjourns her decision: William had to return in three months with his pay slips and proof that he had seen a doctor.

Are these adjournments, perhaps the best way to reconcile firmness and gentleness? William continues to be under pressure: he has to consult a doctor and continue to maintain a certain physical fitness to allow him to continue working. On the other hand the judge showed a remarkable respect. She treated him with dignity, appealed to his better judgment and to his sense of responsibility. She relied on the possibility of time healing him! Where else are gentleness and firmness so strongly effective than in the passage of time? What is more gentle than this passage of time that eventually achieves healing. Also what is more firm than this slow process which always works towards an outcome: be it positive or negative?

Next, let us consider Yasser, seventeen and a half, arrested for possession and use of drugs, for receiving and attacking an officer. This morning he is summoned to appear before the juvenile court. Yasser, who seemed unconcerned, arrived an hour late. This silent boy who was amassing offenses and penalties seemed to be in a dream world. *“What are you doing with your life?”* questioned the judge. *“Nothing, I stay home, I go out, that is all.”* The young man who lived with his parents dropped out of training after five days. *“I can find work”*, he mutters, *“the problem is getting up early.”* When forced to enroll in a training establishment, or in general education, nothing came of it. This time Yasser could receive a prison sentence. *“What does prison mean to you?”* asked the Judge. *“That happens to everybody”* he

replied. After some deliberation, Yasser was given a two month suspended prison sentence. *“This sentence will be kept on your file for five years: commit the smallest offense and it will be enforced”* warned the judge.

We see here the same concern as in the former case to bring together firmness and gentleness, the same reliance on time, the same prudence to produce an opening which would prevent the condemned despairing.

The witness of Maryse

I would like to tell you about a break up and a reconciliation between me and one of my daughters. A break up without argument, shouting, anger or tears.

My daughter was divorced and informed me that she intended to re-marry. She distanced herself from God and stopped going to Communion! She said to me *“This is my business, between me and God.”*

From then on, there was silence between us: no telephone calls, no visits, no going out together. During family events my daughter was polite but icy. I prayed *“Lord send your Spirit onto my child that she may be enlightened and change.”*

I tried, but God did not answer. Then I went to see Jean Baptist. I explained my problem and he said *“Telephone her”*.

I immediately said: *“It is not up to me to telephone! It is up to her.”* After several days of reflection and prayer, I telephoned. My daughter was so happy to hear me and immediately suggested that she should come over. The next day she came and we had a long conversation without mentioning religion. She spoke about her work and I about my activities, and our friendship was re-established.

Four months later the marriage took place. The friends who were gathered that evening to celebrate heard the groom welcome us saying: *“Circumstances did not allow for a priest, a pastor or a rabbi to be with*

us". Then he ended with a prayer in which he made reference to the union of Adam and Eve.

A few days later my daughter wrote these words to me: *"A thousand thanks Mum for your presence, both physical and by your thoughts and prayers that I felt so strongly and which will help us to continue this great voyage that we have begun together."*

From that day onward I prayed: *"Lord protect and guide my children, not as I want but as you want"*.

A difficult reconciliation between extreme attitudes

In some recent talks, Christel Petticollin an educator echoed the questions that all parents and at all ages ask about their children. To establish good communications with one's children where do we stand? What should we allow? What should we prohibit and how? With what should we deal severely and with what punishments? What skills should we develop to become "Good" parents?

She recommends that we should stop psychoanalyzing and rediscover elementary common sense. Parents should forget about being 'perfect'! Parental guilt is for her a veritable poison, from the educational perspective. It distorts all the boundaries and makes parents lose the most elementary objectivity. Education thus becomes disjointed and illogical. The need to re-establish the right to imperfection in educational matters and rediscover a balance seems to her to be indispensable to progress effectively.

To place one's child in fierce school competitiveness, to overburden him with additional activity, to risk arriving at a different outcome to that aimed at: anxiety, overwork and depression are

more and more frequent in children, because children are not 'mini adults'. The most helpful attitude for our children is therefore to find a balance between firmness and gentleness.

Francoise Dolto said: "We have to be truthful with children". She meant that we have to tell our children that the unspoken word can cause far greater anxiety than well chosen words in a delicate situation. But when it is a question of important things and even more when it is a question of serious matters, adults often become clumsy and ill at ease, and transmit their personal malaise in a confused and muddled situation. Tangled in their fear of worse (drugs, escapism and suicide) disconcerted by emotional explosions and overcome by the generation difference, parents often lose the necessary benchmarks to shield their teenagers.

Nowadays young people are not growing up in the same situations as previous generations. The ideas trafficked by society have changed greatly during the last thirty years. Many parents, teachers and educators no longer know what to say nor how to train and motivate adolescents. Today's teenagers are obliged to endure their adolescent crises in a world which is itself in crisis.

The famous psychoanalyst Father Tony Anatrella often recalls the expression "adolescentocentric society" to label this world of parents in crisis. In this world, it is no longer firmness and gentleness that are the order of the day, but rather violence and laxity. Violence which overburdens one's time and affects the future of young people to the detriment of their tastes and habits as we might see in the "Dead poets society". Or laxity which resorts to leaving things alone up to the point, denounced by Tony Anatrella, where the children themselves become the confidants of their confused parents.

A rule of human wisdom

“Nothing is so murderous as cowardice; nothing is so human as firmness” wrote Charles Peguy in *Works in Prose*, 1909-1914. This quote brings to us the treasure of human wisdom that can be found in the cultural heritage of all nations. Cowardice can lead to violence as much as its opposite authoritarianism. Both these attitudes have abandoned firmness just as much as gentleness. In the quote from Peguy, if the word cowardice can be replaced by “authoritarianism”, the word “firmness” can be replaced by gentleness. Thus “cowardice” is not opposed to “firmness” except in as much as it leads to violence. Under this title it could also be opposed to gentleness.

In other words – but doubtless we need to bear in mind translations – Hindu wisdom invites us to a firmness full of gentleness. *“Strengthen, as soon as possible, your spirit with courage and patience, so that you can endure sorrow with determination.”* A Hindu quote from Hindu wisdom, from the 11th century. This maxim indicates the conditions of this gentle firmness or of this firm gentleness: we need courage and patience. This courage and this patience imply some training: we do not become gentle or firm from one day to the next. Courage is forged in trial and it is patience which gives an inseparable union to gentleness and firmness.

In another style doubtless more forceful Woody Allen exclaimed: *“The dictatorship is ‘shut up’, democracy is ‘always concerned’”*. A quote from Woody Allen; *Maxims* – 1987. It is a way of saying that authoritarianism and laxity do not resolve the relationship which must support leaders with those who are subordinate to them. Firmness and gentleness cannot be united

except on a basis that is more solid than a simple strategy of circumstance.

The principle that unites firmness and gentleness was not invented by Jean-Marie de La Mennais. Continuing to remain in the field of simple human wisdom we can find it again in the dignified pages of the *Maxims and Reflections* of La Rochefoucauld: “*Only those who possess firmness are able to show true gentleness.*”² We are here told that the measure of gentleness is firmness. How can we understand that? A strong person is firm in his convictions, and in the guidelines for his actions. He will have examined objections and criticism, and is anchored in the reasoning behind his obligations. He will however have sufficient self-confidence to go forward with a firm step, even if he continues to question himself on this or that point of detail and thus to exhibit prudence. This confidence gives him an interior strength which explains his calm exterior, his gentleness. Jean-Marie gives us the reverse of this principle: “*The firmness of a priest must always remain calm as is his soul.*” The benchmark of firmness is gentleness. Agitation, impatience, and anger only betray a basic insecurity unsure of which steps to take.

A social rule

What applies at the level of individuals also applies at the level of society. In an article published in the newspaper *La Croix*³, The Bishop of Angouleme, France, Claude Dagens, returned to the debate on “Marriage for all” which caused turmoil in the first year of office of President François Hollande. He speaks there of a

² To Querret, March 17, 1815, C.G. I, p. 277.

³ *La Croix*, April 22, 2013.

certain number of French Catholics... caught up in the acts of violence but in which they felt able to affirm their identity, in a militant manner, either by defending themselves against those who attacked them or by taking part in offensive activities hoping thus to re-establish themselves in a dominant position in society. "A culture of combat" which "is nothing new". "It is a tradition somewhat like the intransigent Catholicism which developed throughout the nineteenth century towards all those who seemed hostile to the Church's authority. Further, Bishop Dagens indicates with some subtlety that "those who distance themselves from religion must quietly rejoice that the image of today's Catholicism is bound up with this current offensive. What a triumph it might be if one could show that these believers were all violent shadowy individuals!" He questions: "Must we resign ourselves to these explosions of militant individualism which seems to have value also for young Catholics." He answers: "It is important that we fight against everything which de-humanizes our society, against this pressure which reduces people to mere objects to be manipulated according to the needs of financial gain or technology in all domains." Then addressing himself to the leaders of the Catholic Church in France with whom he declares himself "in solidarity", he confides: "I sometimes have the impression that the joy at the election of Pope Francis is blurred by the current tension and that the references to simplicity and the power of the gospels is diminishing... are we going to stop taking decisions based on our catholic faith and the hope that we place in God's mercy? It is not political cunning that we need, but the courage to be ourselves disciples and witnesses of Him who came *to seek out and to save that which was lost*"⁴ and also *'to reunite the scattered children of God'*."⁵

⁴ Lk 19,10

⁵ Jn 11,52

Bishop Dagens here pictures an “intransigent Catholicity” in whose eyes gentleness and firmness are not generally perceived to have the necessary efficiency, but this is the case for all extremist parties. It seems that this twin gentleness-firmness does not change in the same way, nor at the same time as that of “explosions of individualism”. These latter operate in the short time through agitation, and are rather in the public domain, the media. The union of gentleness and firmness depends rather on the long term and operates in quasi confidential circumstances. Did not Jean-Marie write “*the work of God only grows in the dark and the dew from heaven only falls during the night.*”⁶ When Bishop Dagens speaks about “an identity” which hopes to be affirmed, to achieve a “dominant position,” hopefully he clearly indicates the factors which counteract this union of gentleness and firmness. Affirming an identity and seeking a dominant position are rarely compatible with a firm and tranquil attitude which pursues its goal with determination and serenity.

A principle of Jean-Marie de La Mennais.

Understanding this theme leads us to study more closely what constitutes a “constant” in the behavior of Jan-Marie de La Mennais: to confront every difficulty in complete firmness and gentleness. Whenever he wished to praise someone, he never failed to show this quality. This was the case, for example, for Mr. Bachelot, a professor of humanities, his colleague at the college of St Malo. He remembered “*a zeal filled with gentleness and a deep*

⁶ To Miss de Lucinière, January 8, 1838, C.G. IV, p. 16.

intelligence"⁷, a deep intelligence doubtless explained the bond of zeal and gentleness.

We find similar themes in the funeral sermon of Mr Querret *"Did anyone know better than he how to uphold the strictness of a leader, and the indulgence and kindness of a father? Every time that I visited his school, I was very aware of the repugnance that he felt when he had to inform me of the pain that certain people caused him. And when truth prevented him from excusing wrongs he seemed nevertheless to still need to excuse them; and if he could not always absolve the past. He always tried to see in the future some consolations and hopes which enabled us to avoid taking immediate and severe sanctions."*⁸

In his letters to those he was guiding, he managed to explain the reasons for this double stance, firstly the negative: *"Gentleness presupposes the destruction of all self-love, of all self-will, of all natural desires."*⁹ Then the positive: *"Do you desire an unalterable gentleness, then lose yourself in God, that is to say allow Him to lead you even in the smallest of matters; walk always in the light of his face."*¹⁰ *"How is it my daughter that you lack this gentleness? Is it not because you serve God only for yourself?"*¹¹ *He praised this gentleness so full of joy and peace, of love and hope that has been promised to those who elevating themselves above their nature and their senses to see God and only God in everything."*¹² "Detachment and openness to God opens one to a universal friendship. Friendship may be the name under which firmness and gentleness are united." Friendship is not an empty

⁷ To Bishop Enock, January 7, 1808, C.G. I, p. 142.

⁸ Sermons, I, p. 573.

⁹ To Miss Jallobert de Monville, 1813 (?), C.G. I, p. 142.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.* C.G. I, p. 143

¹² *ibid.*

word and the strength of gentleness and of persuasion is far greater and firmer than any other.”¹³

Of course the constant which joins gentleness and firmness is Jesus Christ. *“Whatever the political events may be, our words and our actions must be constantly inspired by a spirit of gentleness and peace and we must not forget that if our Saviour recommended the simplicity of the dove, He wished also that we should have the wisdom of a serpent”*¹⁴ he wrote to a parish priest in his diocese. The perfection of prudence is to have adapted one’s actions to the prevailing conditions. This ‘pair’ gentleness-firmness allows us therefore to adapt to different situations realistically. It is particularly in adversity that we need to exhibit this prudence, inspired by an all-encompassing friendship. *“Taste, savour the sweetness of this bitter drink that men offer you and remember the teaching and example that our Divine Saviour has shown to you.”*¹⁵

Implementing this principle in the teaching methods of Jean-Marie.

Problems are not always dramatic. But they are always there. Jean-Marie came to understand this in the spiritual direction of the brothers. We have numerous letters addressed to Bro Ambroise Le Haiget, a brother somewhat given to intransigence and not a little demanding. It was because Jean-Marie had a high regard for this brother who would become superior of the brothers in the West Indies and a member of the Council of the

¹³ To Father Langrez, June 17, 1814, C.G. I, p. 293/

¹⁴ To various parish priests, May 8, 1825, C.G. I, p. 293.

¹⁵ To Miss Jallobert de Monville, May 29, 1814, C.G. I, p. 157.

Institute that he watched over his psychological and spiritual formation. Together these letters prove a real spiritual treaty. He advises him on the attitude to take with the brothers for whom he is directly responsible. Here are some extracts from letters of a correspondence over some thirty years. It allows us to understand the character of Brother Ambroise and also the frequency with which his Father exhorted him to firmness filled with gentleness.”

“You know that Brother Jean-Marie has an imagination which sometimes leads him into error; You need to show a special care for him, without spoiling him; speak to him always with gentleness and kindness, especially when you have to refuse a request.”¹⁶

“You are too sensitive about the things that Brother Xavier had to say to you: it is not that I excuse him, but whatever may be the wrong you must not be so distressed as you have been by the things that are offensive in the letters that he has written to you: The Gospel advises us not to break the bruised reed: put this maxim of gentleness and kindness into practice and guard against further aggravation by bitter reproaches however just, from this poor brother who’s imagination is so wild.”¹⁷

“I cannot imagine what I might have said or done to poor Brother Severin that he is so angry with me: remain calm: I will speak to him gently, visit him as often as you can, try to calm his unfortunate imagination.”¹⁸

“What Brother Herve has done is quite distressing and alarming: this shows how weak is his mind and his spirit! However, the manner in which he has expressed his sorrow leads me to hope that this fault may serve as a lesson: it is important to know if he is sincere, the lack of candour and humility is indeed great and hinders the correction of all other faults: you appreciate that at

¹⁶ To Brother Ambroise Le Haiget, November 8, 1825, C.G. II, 347.

¹⁷ To Brother Ambroise Le Haiget, May 26, 1835, C.G. III, 215.

¹⁸ To Brother Ambroise Le Haiget, July 8, 1837, C.G. III, p. 496.

such a great distance [Brother Ambroise was in the West Indies in those days] it is impossible for me to judge this, It is up to you to examine that: whatever may be the case treat this poor brother with great gentleness, do not make any complaint to him which might wound or aggravate him, open your heart to him that he might be warmed and healed, encourage him to reply to my last letters and get him to admit his faults, he has hardly ever written to me and this is unfortunate for him, because a superior has grace to direct those that Divine Providence confides to him.

Finally I believe that a change is necessary for Brother Herve, he has established too strong ties with Basse-Terre and he has too many contacts with other people, and that is leading him astray. When the new brothers arrive, you need to consider whether this may be the right time to bring about these changes: it seems to me that Brother Hyacinthe could replace him, without doubt Brother Hyacinthe is less academic: but he has much piety: he is so holy! I have infinitely more confidence in holiness than in all the talents in the world. For the rest do not take what I say to you as a decision, an order: whatever steps you take I will approve them, again I repeat whatever you do will be done well.”¹⁹

“I must say that you have been much too severe in your judgements on the brothers that we have sent to you: If they are not completely capable when they arrive they will quickly become so, provided that you do not upset them, on the contrary you must encourage them: even here we have not been very happy with some of your comments not least regarding the expedition of the supplies that we send you. I do not doubt that on this latter point you may eventually be right to complain but again, more moderation and more gentleness in your language will do no harm.”²⁰

¹⁹ To Brother Ambroise Le Haiget, September 15, 1844, C.G. V, 235

²⁰ To Brother Ambroise Le Haiget, April 14, 1847, C.G. V, 586.

“When you write to our brother bursars about your supplies, do so with more moderation and gentleness, your bitter complaints, and harsh words serve only to anger and discourage, in this latter case they are not only against charity but also against justice: the delays that you have endured have been caused by circumstances independent of the actions of those to whom you address such harsh complaints. I have deleted a part of your last letter to Brother Joseph Marie: telling him only what he needs to hear.

In the same way your observations on the new primary Reader are much too critical and not at all in accord with the judgement that our teaching brothers have made about this small text book which they are generally delighted with.”²¹

Finally everything can be summarized in the remarks at the end of another letter: *“Humility, charity, gentleness these are your arms”*.²² We see on reading these extracts that Jean-Marie did not content himself with simply giving advice to the brothers, he himself lived out the message of his advice by the patience which he showed. Brother Ambroise seemed like a demanding leader. Father de La Mennais so thoughtful about respect and justice towards the brothers had on several occasions to reprimand some acts of impatience for him to write this advice always couched in humility, charity and gentleness. It was this however that enabled him to never fail to be able to discern the truth.

²¹ To Brother Ambroise Le Haiget, January 21, 1849, C.G. VI, 131

²² To Brother Ambroise Le Haiget, May 18, 1832, C.G. II, 563.

The personal example of Jean-Marie de La Mennais

Apart from these continual but relatively modest difficulties, Jean-Marie had from time to time to face terrible events which called into question his actions and even he, himself. We think of course of the drama of his brother Feli which had never ending repercussions on his life and work. When he spoke about this drama he never departed from this principle of firmness and gentleness which always determined his conduct and judgement.

“The injustice of certain men and their actions was what caused so most pain; he was never able to raise himself, in a spirit of faith, above all this misery; or rather he could with God’s help, which never fails us, but he did not and he slipped more and more into error and into fantasies which his imagination tinted in some way like the sun setting below the horizon colours the clouds.(...) For myself, for whatever I have been blamed for, I have always sought and will always seek, whatever may be said and done, to convince him of my sincere attachment: however, because I can never stop being his brother and loving him with all my heart, and further the only way that I may bring him back to the right path where we may walk together and from where he has so unfortunately departed, is to convince him more and more that no one loves him more than this poor Jean to whom he causes so much sorrow”²³

Behind these reflections was drawn, as in a negative, “the spirit of faith” of Jean-Marie to which his brother “could” raise himself with God’s grace. He allows us “to rise above all our difficulties”. It relies on the “help of God” which humility invites. From this “spirit of faith” springs the clarity that establishes this

²³ To Mr de Senfft, April 10, 1836, C.G. III, p. 346.

dawn of thought in Feli. But from thence springs also this fraternal tenderness which seeks to excuse him by recalling this “injustice of certain men and their actions”. And this fraternal tenderness is not weakness: it always aims to “bring back to the right road”, though it does express forgiveness, “no one has loved him as much as this wretched Jean to whom he causes so much grief”. In that we have a magnificent balance that can bring God to those who live in a “spirit of faith”.

The justification of this principle of Jean-Marie.

Having examined how this harmonious balance of firmness and gentleness is shown in the life of Jean-Marie we can try to follow it to the source. It is primarily through his sermons that this is shown.

A first explanation of this balance is absolute confidence in the Creator. *“The soul that is obedient and adaptable in God’s hands completely forgetting self... is deeply convinced of the action of God in everything... far from being irritated by contradictions and being painfully upset by the constant feelings of impatience and bitter disappointment... will taste a peace which nothing will alter, and will constantly bless, adore.... the designs of Providence on him.”*²⁴

A second explanation is the bringing to light, so that we can combat them, of the factors which hinder this firmness and gentleness. What is it that reigns in the place of these feelings of abandonment, of simplicity, of faith? *“Pride, the love of our own self will.” “You hope that your thoughts may become others’*

²⁴ Sermons I, p. 112.

*wisdom, the mark of their intelligence, their invariable and sacred rule. ...Vanity hides in the deepest recesses of the heart from where it stirs up with its offspring, the most violent passions often without our realising itYou do not know how to leave God to find God; because you do not listen to his voice, which tells you in the secret of your heart, to wait for the moment that He has marked out.”*²⁵ Knowledge of the enemy is a pre-condition to confronting it, in the depth of your heart.

Beyond Mirrors

“I do not dare to look at mirrors!” This reflection, frequently repeated following a grave fault underlies what everyone experiences spontaneously, the need to look in a “mirror” to consider one’s personal dignity. But where can we find a reliable “mirror” one which reflects the truth with accuracy.

It is better to avoid looking for it in the stack of reproaches that my interior voice addresses to me in anger. “You have behaved in a disgraceful manner you have deceived me...” These violent cries against me often do not do justice to the real weight of my faults. In fact they stem from these “keepers of order” that throughout my youth have, despite me, found a home within me. They are also the remains of these unreachable ideals shaped by my imagination. Sometimes they even take the shape of an “eye of Cain” which never endingly pursues the guilty, even to the grave.

On meditating the Word of God the Christian will, little by little, discover that the only “mirror” that does not distort is the face of Christ such as it is described in the Gospels. But may we again talk about the mirror? Not really! To accept Christ’s look is really a life changing experience. Instead of feeling depressed before this tarnished image of oneself we will know the wild confidence of a saviour who became the “friend of sinners”.

²⁵ *ibid.*

Instead of enduring the violence of a merciless judge we find ourselves invited by the Spirit to arise and to receive the Father's pardon and to walk the journey of human kind with a Companion who is Truth and Life.

Xavier Thévenot, SDB, Institut Catholique de Paris

Good judgement constitutes another branch. *“Exaggeration in evil concerns me less than exaggeration in good; because eventually wickedness weakens, worn out, even, by its own excesses. Do you want to give it back its power? Commit error; violently break the barriers that you should respect: respect nothing. Idiot! Your enemies will not do as much harm to you in twenty years that you will do to yourself in a day”*²⁶ Jean-Marie here denounces “exaggeration in goodness” It is another name for fanaticism, It is the temptation that Bishop Dagens speaks of in the article quoted above. The most just causes lose all credibility when they are promulgated by violence and intransigence.

Firmness and gentleness may be understood also by an understanding of the psychology of the enemy. *“If you remain faithful to me the disdain that the impious show to you will be but apparent. They laugh at the coward who hides his faith far more than at the true Christian who confesses it openly. On the contrary they know, thanks to this gift of honesty, what allows them to show themselves as they really are, and they secretly respect it. His virtue captivates them... the esteem of men of good will, and also even the wicked, is the first prize that he receives from his firmness and his devotion to his work.”*²⁷ Gentle firmness, which in the 20th century took on the name of non-violence, achieved for its followers a resounding success.

²⁶ Sermons I, p. 88.

²⁷ Sermons I, p. 166.

A final explanation is the imitation of those who become a model of firmness and gentleness. *“Peace and joy are the fruits of the Holy Spirit: the holiest of men are always happy and peaceful. There is no company more pleasant or more enjoyable than theirs. St. Francis de Sales for example was really good company, he carefully avoided all kinds of affectation, all appearance of austerity and harshness, but his words were always direct, always edifying, and when he had left, one felt more inclined to virtue and more zealous to practice the often difficult work that this imposes.”*²⁸

Thus Jean-Marie developed successively psychological, theological, spiritual considerations to sustain this indissoluble union of firmness and gentleness.

Faced with an injury, an insult or an offence, Eckhart Tolle proposes that we try an experiment. Not to provoke the usual reaction but to see what happens internally. To observe the sensation of shrinkage of the ego, which normally pushes us to enter into one of three possibilities: fight, flee or restraint. This sensation taken by itself is like an emotional wave which passes over us and which we could easily allow to pass through us. Without adding anything to it. Like the emotional wave of fear following the risk of a fall which could have become serious which possesses us and then recedes. But what we normally do is to construct a scenario above our emotions. Why? Because we believe that there is someone who has been affected. Who is it who is diminished if not an image of myself that I want to protect. Every time we put ourselves on the defensive to adopt an offensive position (how dare you say that to me...?) in reality we are only defending an illusion. What we really are is only an image and does not need to be defended.

²⁸ Sermons I, p. 356.

The scriptural foundation of this principle

It is definitely in his faith and his attachment to Scripture that Jean-Marie draws this constant principle of action. Is not this alliance of firmness and gentleness found fundamentally in He who was called gentle and humble of heart and who was shown so during his life? Jean-Marie has numerous times developed this theme for sermons when preparing parish missions. Let us pause at one of these which is particularly significant.

“Having protested to Jesus Christ that his commandments would be eternally dear, have you not unworthily broken them? Reply in the presence of this cross. Someone here resolves to renounce his debts and resolves to repay them, another has frequented discos, dances and erotic clubs; each one solemnly takes resolutions suitable to his position and his state of life; scarcely have we seen these happy days pass that we see the same abuses, the same scandals, the same excess.” We have here the echoes of the prophets of the Old Testament. They never ceased to denounce infidelity to the Law. But their response was often that of God’s vengeance: from then on, Israel had broken the covenant, it needed to wait for the invasion of the countries to the North or from Egypt, with the processions of deportations and difficulties of all kinds. This was, in some way, the economy of the first alliance that of give-give where the God of Israel was manifest like the Baal of Israel, a God, in fact, not very different to the Gods of the nations. To be honest with the texts of these Sermons we must remember that Jean-Marie often expressed himself in the style of the first alliance. But equally in the Gospels we find terrible words even in the mouth of Jesus Himself.

This text written about a conference of Henri VIAUD-MURA, and appearing in a copy of the periodical Source de Vie might help us to understand this literary genre.

When the Lord announced terrible judgements on sinners, it was not through light heartedness that He did this, He did it to push sinners to repentance and to show them that if, they do not react to this wonderful love shown by Jesus, if they do not respond to his love, terrible judgements will fall upon them. It is as if they were saying "I want nothing from He who paid so much for me. I want to do my own thing I want to pay." They do not realise the price that they will have to pay, the sea of fire and sulphur for all eternity. It is frightful. If only people could understand this, they would throw themselves into the arms of God saying. "But I do not want anything to do with this hell. I understand what you have enabled me to avoid by your wonderful love and I wish to respond to this love". Read the Apocalypse, these terrible judgments that God prophesied for the world which will soon fall on the earth. God, so to say, predicts once again to sinners that they may repent, that they might experience the fear of God in their heart. That they might turn to God saying "Lord I understand, I have been thoughtless, a fool, forgive me now." Until the very last moment the voice of God will ring out to bring them back to Him. God does not want judgment to fall on his creatures. He does not want it to fall on his children either.

However, on the return from exile, things were going to change. Jeremiah shared the events at the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 6th centuries. The beginning of his ministry corresponded to the reign of Josiah with the deuterocanonical reform. In any case this reform arrived too late, as the prophetess Ulda indicated. Actually Josiah was killed at Megiddo, in 609, transpierced with an Egyptian arrow. A royal decree was not enough to make the people change their behaviour. Jeremiah was

persuaded that the infidel Jerusalem would one day fall because the alliance had been broken.

However, he proclaimed a great future, a wonderful hope. But this hope is no longer focused on the ancient alliance where God only repairs that which could end in further failure. We could say that the function of this alliance is not the same. The oracle of the new alliance of Jr 31:31-34 constitutes a real interior revolution of the first testament:

“Behold the days are coming, declared the Lord. When I will establish with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah a new covenant. Not like the covenant that I established with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. They, they have broken my covenant and I was master (ba’al) over them, declared the Lord. Because this is the covenant that I made with the house of Israel after these days, declared the Lord, I will put my law (Torah) within them and write it in their heart, I will be their God and they will be my people. And they will no longer teach a man and his friend and a man and his brother saying: know the Lord! Because they will all know me, from the smallest to the greatest, declared the Lord, because I will pardon their faults and I will not keep their sins in mind.”

Each verse presents a new and important theme. Jeremiah declares that the covenant has been broken. Hosea had already said this, and this had been recognised since the exodus. We understand here that the covenant would be broken. It was there to condemn sin but it could never save from sin. It shows the inability of man to respect the law of God. It was there so that our conscience could perceive that we had sinned, but it could never give grace. It could not save.

The new spirit of the covenant implies a replacement of the old alliance. The old alliance had truly been repealed. It was broken by the faults of the people. In fact, it had never really been

lived. If we examine what we call the deuterocanonical history, the book of Joshua through to the second book of Kings, we discover that the chosen people had never honoured the alliance to which they were however solemnly committed. God had remained faithful, but the people had proved unfaithful from beginning to end. Thus the promises, especially the conquest of the world, were never fully realised.

The expression “new alliance” is an original expression, but it does have parallels. Notably in Ezekiel: a new heart, a heart of flesh, a new spirit. Isaiah²⁹ announces much that is new. Jeremiah is found in this same thread. But the idea of new things is here very radical. For Jeremiah it was not a question of a renewed alliance, it was a question of a completely new alliance: not in the content of the law, but in its observance. What was going to happen would be profoundly new.

The central point of the first alliance was the law. The unfaithfulness to the alliance was first and foremost unfaithfulness to the law. Was it therefore necessary to change the law, to make the law less severe, easier for the people?

Should God be more gentle and less severe? In fact God did not inspire through Jeremiah a new law. The law of Moses remained in force. It was not the content that changed but the way that it was proclaimed.

Until now the law was engraved on stone. What was new was that, in future, it would be written in men’s hearts. That is to say on all that is invisible. It would no longer be ‘outside’ people, consequently the way in which it would be proclaimed would not be external either. Written in hearts, the observation of this law, which is not new, except by its means of transmission, would become accessible. To understand this availability we need to

²⁹ Is 55.

complete the oracle by that of Ezekiel 36. It would be the Holy Spirit infused into men's hearts that would make them able to accomplish the law of God: an ability however that would not come into force immediately, but must endure the delays of healing and spiritual evolution.

For Jeremiah the new alliance consisted in the action of God in the heart of man. Man by himself is not able to change his heart, to circumcise it. Only God can do this. The psalms take up the idea: "*create in me a pure heart, O My God.*" Only God can create. And to create is to make from nothing. It is not renewal. It is a heart that did not previously exist. In this field of the change of heart, Ezekiel went further than Jeremiah. He added the word 'spirit', created like the heart³⁰. Two words which evoke the action of the spirit of God in man. The Creator Spirit permits us to live the Life of Love in all its fullness, as something interior not exterior. God bestows the Spirit who enables me to accomplish his Law without effort.

But the most innovator element of this oracle was the proclamation of an unconditional and eternal pardon. The only commandment that matters is that of receiving God's forgiveness when I have not observed His Law. The road to holiness does not consist in moral perfection, but in an overwhelming confidence in God's forgiveness. That which is most serious is not that we fall ,but that we refuse to allow ourselves to be raised up. It is a question of accepting mercy and not of firstly living the Law perfectly. We do not live under the law of gift (conditional gift) of the old alliance but under that of forgiveness (unconditional forgiveness) of the new covenant.

³⁰ Ez 36,27.

The principle of the new covenant.

The oracle of Jeremiah will be found accomplished in a startling manner in Jesus Christ. And it is this that Jean-Marie recalls in his sermons. We have abandoned it, fully renouncing, the renewed sins of the parishioners. We await the proclamation of a just and severe punishment that our deep seated anticipation leads us to expect in these circumstances, but this was the unexpected ending of the sermon: *“Well, my friends, your wishes are granted; at this very moment as I speak, He is crucified in the souls of most of those who are listening to me, this Jesus whom you betrayed with a kiss of peace. Poor souls, are you then lost without help? Are the fruits of His passion wiped out for you? No my brothers, in His charity, He looks only for our repentance, even for unforgivable crimes, and however great may be your sins, His mercy is even greater... Let us beat our breast like the centurion as he left Calvary: we are all sinners; our sins are here before us: it is printed on this cross which is a reproach to us..: but mercy is also engraved there in words which cannot be effaced; let us therefore with confidence implore, not the mercy of angels and saints but the great and supreme mercy of a crucified God whom we have caused to die and who must bring about our resurrection”*.

Jean-Marie was on the right of the new covenant that was already announced in the first Testament and realized in the New. God’s forgiveness comes to us through the passion of our Saviour, already foretold by the second Isaiah and which served as a canvas for the passion narrative of Jesus. Jean-Marie turned the hearts of the faithful towards the cross. It is there that God’s forgiveness is revealed. Forgiveness that indicated both *fault* quite strongly expressed and also *remission of this fault*, in a gentleness which so affects us as to leave us speechless. Supreme wisdom

who pardons, and for whom firmness and gentleness are indispensable.

The prayer that closes the sermon is a beautiful précis of all that has been said:

“Lord Jesus, mercy! Open, enlarge your wounds; we have no other good, nor other safety; in them we find our refuge, they are our handiwork. It is we who have pierced your hands and feet; it is we who have forced onto your head the thorns which have wounded it; it is we who have taken a murderous lance and who have pierced your heart; it is we who have filled the jug with vinegar and venom that was offered for your thirst. Lord we are your executioners. Lord pray for us; say to your Father: Father pardon them because they do not know what they are doing. No, Lord, we did not understand what we did after having received so many salutary lessons, so much help, so many extraordinary graces which we have abused, we did not know what we were doing when, through vain and miserable pretexts, we distanced ourselves from the sacraments, that is to say the source of light, peace and salvation. Behold, we stand before you, we beg for grace, pardon and mercy.”

Another sermon given on the occasion of a Profession of Faith – but we know that this kind of sermon served as a canvas for Jean-Marie to be ready each time that a similar occasion presented itself – made an explicit reference to this “new covenant” which fully justified the link between firmness and gentleness. *“My son, give me your heart” (Proverbs). Such are these words so full of gentleness that God himself addresses to you, and what day has He more right over your heart, than that when He gives you such proof of His Mercy? His anger did not gain sway over his kindness. His graces flow to you in his sacraments and even today we have seen you seated at the table of the Father*

of mercies; His body was the bread with which you were nourished and for drink you have taken his blood!

He has truly desired to establish a New Covenant with you and to make it in some way more definite, more authentic, more inviolable, He has given Himself to you totally. I have the gentlest hope that nothing may ever separate you from the love of Jesus Christ.”³¹

The alloy firmness-gentleness is called forgiveness

From now on under the regime of the new covenant the only demand is forgiveness. It is the subject of the first letter of John, the acknowledgement of one’s sins, to obtain pardon. John well understood that all the economy of the new covenant is here. But it would be easy to show that all the writers of the New Testament converge on this celebration of forgiveness. Just as much Paul, as James who draws these practical conclusions of this new divine attitude.

“As a prisoner of the Lord then, I exhort you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received, Be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace.”³²

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life. By deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven, but is truly unspiritual, of the devil.

³¹ Renewal of the vows of Baptism, Sermons I, p. 462-65.

³² Ep 4,1-3.

For where you have envy and selfish ambition there you will find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peaceful, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”³³

And what do the Evangelists say? Here two points arrest our attention. Firstly the sin against the Holy Spirit. What might be the sin that could not be forgiven, when terrible sins have been committed against the Son of Man and have been pardoned? It is the refusal of that which is given precisely with the Holy Spirit: the forgiveness of sins. “Jesus breathed on them and said to them: *“Receive the Holy Spirit! Your sins are forgiven...”*³⁴ What can one hope for from someone who deliberately refuses this forgiveness of sins, the first effect of the coming of the down pouring of the Spirit?

The second point is Jesus’ harshness towards fraternal forgiveness³⁵, at the end of the parable where the master remits a debt. Why? Simply because to forgive is to identify oneself with Christ and, through Him, to the Father of all mercy. It is to enter into the movement of the new covenant and therefore into the Kingdom of Heaven proclaimed from the beginning of the Gospels. It is also the only condition that figures in the prayer of Our Lord: *“as we forgive those who trespass against us”*.³⁶

³³ Jm 3,13-18.

³⁴ Jn 20,22.

³⁵ Cf. Mt 18,35.

³⁶ Mt 6,12.

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“Affirming that repentance is necessary for the granting of pardon inevitably leads us to study the texts such as Mt 6,15; 18,33-35, Mk 11,25-26 or Lk 11,4 which seems to say that divine pardon depends on human pardon. However, this understanding cannot be maintained because the rest of the biblical teaching clearly shows that it is not in pardoning that we can receive God’s pardon (this would be salvation by good works). From then on, it seems that these texts present human pardon as the “consequential condition” of divine pardon and not as the cause, which is the grace of God. And it is not an isolated case since biblical teaching does present other “consequential conditions” of salvation such as for example perseverance (Mt 10,22; 24,13) or satisfaction (Hebrews 12,14; 1 Cor 6,9 etc).

From then on, was the combination formed by gentleness and firmness called forgiveness? He confronts sin without denying it without ever excusing it. He continues to speak to those who have committed it. He never closes the path of hope. This union which the world awaited has now been achieved and proclaimed on the cross, and has enlightened forever the conduct of Christians: *“Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”* This was used by the first martyr, Stephen, as the archetype of what would henceforth inspire all Christian behavior: *“Do not count this sin against them!”*³⁷

³⁷ Ac 7,60.

Jean-Marie de La Mennais taking as a principle the action of gentleness united with firmness introduced into his congregations the spirituality of forgiveness. He set his sisters and brothers on the path to divine love which, in the new covenant, has taken the form of forgiveness.

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