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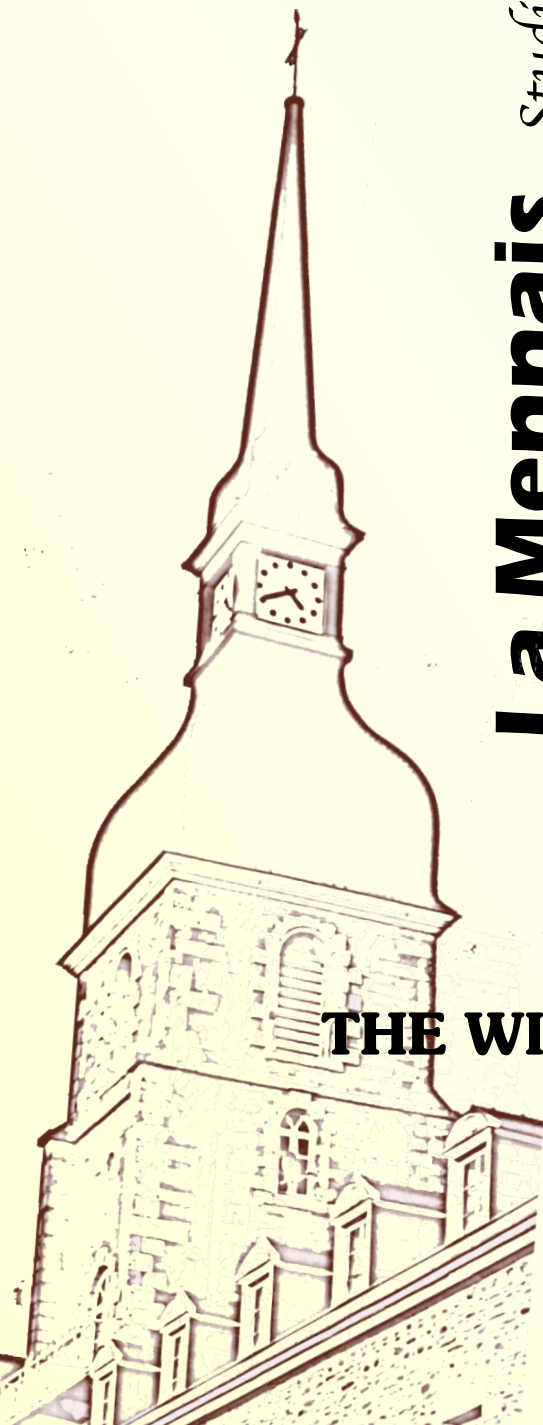
La Mennais *Studies*



THE WILL OF GOD

Hno Josu OLABARRIETA

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Introduction

"The rule of my thoughts and conduct is therefore to want what God wills, as he wills it and when he wills it."¹

Thus resounds the strong, energetic, vigorous word of Jean-Marie expressing the scope of his research and behaviour throughout his existence. He always felt his life was driven by the Spirit of God without spectacular knowledge, but in the indestructible certainty that in seeking, tasting and following the will of God, his life unfolded and that in that alone resided the most complete and most lasting happiness.

Jean-Marie said that in a sermon talking about abandonment to Providence. His words sounded like a profession of faith, or a declaration of principles. The compass of his proceedings, the one that guided his steps that marked his life since the age of twenty when he felt called to the priestly vocation, the soul of his works, his struggles, his love ... was the will of God. There is only God alone to fill his interiority, to realise his life project, and to appease his desire.

¹ *Sermons* II, 2460.

The theme of "God's will" has certainly been a classic theme of spirituality since the origins of our Christian initiation; we have heard it said that without it life cannot be a success, and we are convinced that it constitutes the heart of our following of Jesus.

Surely, Jean-Marie is the heir to a long tradition that has its roots in the biblical tradition and in the very heart of the experience of Jesus: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me"(Jn 4:34). This theme of the will of God appears so central in the life of Jesus that any attempt to minimise it or erase it would be a Christological aberration. There is no knowledge of Jesus of history which does not include the deepening of this relationship; there is no following Jesus without drinking from this source.

It is symptomatic that the phrase of Jean-Marie "to will what God wills," which comes to him, no doubt, from a long stream of influences and spiritual treatises, was used as a theme for the review of spiritual life to the present time.²

Old theme, new theme. The new theme, because in it we verify our being Christian and religious. Theme subject to diverse formulations³, with different accents, but permanent foundations of the one who would like to live his life in reference to God.

To enter into the theme, it will be good to ask ourselves two preliminary questions.

What ensemble of symbols, mental and sensory representations, connotes for us the expression 'God's will' ? We pronounce or simply think of this expression and herein is automatically a symbolic world that stands out around it ... How

² Cf Michel Rondet, SJ, *Christus 144*, Vouloir ce que Dieu veut. La rencontre de deux désirs. *Christus 218*. *A call, an adventure*.

³ "To do what God wants and want what God does", original idea of Saint José María Rubio, s.j., canonized in 2003 by Pope John Paul II. Another formulation of the classical principle "To want what God wants", with a strong Jesuit odour.

does this imagery present itself? What traits does it accentuate and leave them in silence? They will, of course, not be the same for all. They depend on the images of God that has been inculcated in us since childhood, since we received religious education, and on our own psychology.

The second question is equally of great significance: about God, what we do not know outweighs what we know, and this specifically applies to what concerns the theme of his will. Nobody 'knows' God; no one has been his counsellor. To no human being has it been given to know his designs.

In addressing the theme of God's will, we must first of all take off our sandals because we are treading on sacred ground: God himself, an untenable mystery, ineffable (indescribable) for man. This introductory disposition will help us on one hand, not to expound too easily on a theme so intimate to God, that is his will.

The paternal hand of Jean-Marie, his itinerary of life and his writings, will be the support and company for us to taste the sweetness of the food which is for every believer, "the will of the Father who sends us". By following Jesus, by borrowing His words, he decided right from his youth to follow his own way

"Adieu, my dear Bruté; pray for me; especially ask God that I may feed on his will"⁴

⁴ To Bruté de Rémur, August 16, 1807.

1. FIRST PIECE OF ADVICE TO SAILORS

To think about the will of God or talk about it brings us a constellation of expressions and attitudes that we have surely learned in catechism or in a religious class, at the beginning of religious life or in certain "best sellers" of spirituality of certain ages. Expressions that are the reflection of God's image which perhaps has little to do with the Christian revelation.

Some images to eliminate could be these:

Image of the labyrinth: a complicated maze of things half said, interviews, but which remain to guess. The will of God "reified", transformed into something which, after a costly research, may end up being discovered. There are techniques for not getting lost in the maze (the famous "discernment") and expert guides that can help the most awkward to reach the goal. We spend time, energy ... and, despite so many efforts, nobody to ensure that the outcome be good.

Image of the tile: A heavy tile falls into your life, normally to make it more difficult. "It is the will of God," a refrain that recurs in difficult times that demand resignation, easy remedies to explain the inexplicable, to make us accept that which seems to us to be unacceptable. The will of God descends on us in an unpredictable way that leaves us no other alternative, but to invoke the "mysterious plan" and the inscrutable design".

Image of the striking evidence: At other times, we switch over to the offensive and defend with an illuminated air of attitudes, ideas, decisions that "we have seen very clearly before God". It seems that we can enjoy such epiphanies of the will of God that leave no openness to the humble doubt, to the surprise of the Spirit.

To use spatial images, would mean that this will precedes us, that it hides itself somewhere, that we have to walk very carefully not to be misled having seen that at each cross-roads, one way is to be taken and the others being false paths.

And if "to accomplish his will" implies for us the tension of being blameless and meticulous, desirous of "appearing capable" before him, pretending to hold the exact list of what was specified to us in detail about what we must do or not, to be "settled" in his presence..., would we not be drugging him into our small pigeon-holes of our perfectionism and our dissatisfaction?

God, who determines, governs, organises, programmes, decides, projects, would he not be made in the image and resemblance of our proper intentions to intervene, to order and impose to ourselves when we are forsaken, and even if we are not forsaken?

Is it like this that God wants us: infantile, alienated, passive, narrow executors of his orders, taking as alibis masks of "spiritual childhood" that exempt us from the risk of freedom? The motivations of prayer then becomes confused and changing and we can change it into a "protective rite" which makes us and those we love to evade the decisions, which threaten us, or attempt to obtain an intervention to realise our desires and needs.

Jean-Marie was aware of the perennial temptation to represent God in our own image and likeness. He made told his friend Bruté speaking about sacraments, commenting on the

tendency of imposing our form on God, the Entire-Other.

*We do not know enough, my dear friend, putting ourselves above all personal considerations and wanting to oblige our Divine Saviour to always present himself to us in the same form.*⁵

Once purified of these contaminated images of God and of his will, we are available to follow his ways. Cleaning these images sometimes entails disorientation and confusion, which produce painful rifts, such as Jean Marie noted in the beginning conversion:

*The beginnings of conversion are always tough; one cannot break one's habits without a cost: entering in the heart, the truth first throws trouble there, upsets it, and it is only when it is possessed by all our thoughts, when it penetrates and reigns deep in the soul that the peace of God comes to live in it.*⁶

.....

⁵ To Querret, June 22, 1814.

⁶ *Memorial 5.*

Note: As in previous booklets, the text contains testimonies of Brothers and the Laity who wanted to say something on this score without any previous plan. All these testimonies will be marked with a bold line. Being included in the notebook does not imply that they modify the development of the text.

The following testimony is from a Lay person. He points out the difficulties encountered and suggests ways, according to him, of overcoming these contradictions.

Those who, like us, dedicate themselves to education, working with young students, we meet them at a delicate stage of their life: the moment of decision for university education or professional studies in the future. Often, the concerns of our students are expressed thus: "I do not know if I shall succeed".

It is this same doubt that assails us, believers, without willing it while we are at cross-roads where faith is expressed thus: "I do not know if I shall succeed in choosing what God wants for me." This is what we call "to seek the will of God."

In either case, I think that psychology and tradition inculcate in us an idea whose consequence is that these processes come from the anguish and suffering: it is as if, there is life on one side and God on the other who had written on a parchment the university course of my life or the choice of faith for the moment. Given this ideological substratum, our psychology leads us to be anxious because, to be sincere, is no longer a choice but to succeed and to opt for something that is fixed, that I have to do, the risk being not to chose.

In my life and in the lives of the people close to me, I have been able to perceive this experience, the anxiety to deeply believe that God's will for me is written and that I must do what he wants (and consequently, if I do not succeed, then I'm against God!).

However, the healing of this "virus" comes to us from the Word. Jesus shows us God the Father and he challenges us: a Father who loves his children unconditionally (not just if they do what he wants), a Father who always accompanies, and forgives 70 times 7...

Such is the radical novelty of Jesus where his commitments for brotherhood and the Kingdom are rooted. He himself lived the search for the will of the Father. On many occasions he presented to us the "inner struggle of Gethsemane" as an icon of discernment. As always, if we take this text in isolation, we shall fall back into the initial temptation to "pass or fail".

Gethsemane is an intense moment of reaffirmation of a commitment that Jesus took on countless occasions (knowing that we ignore the 30 years of his life ...) and generally, the Word presents himself to us as a bloc: he saw, sympathised, acted and retired to pray.

I have sometimes lived the anguish of the dynamics of the search for God's will for me as "the dynamic of success or error depending on what God had envisaged for me". Yet I do not believe that this is being true to Jesus' style.

To seek the will of God is to seek for the Kingdom, it is searching for "life and life in abundance", it is to see the reality with the eyes of Jesus, leaving our interiority evolve and act by confronting the Word and the community. This does not simplify the way of choice and option, but renders it more humane, more incarnate, and closer to life, to LIFE.

And, instead of the dynamics of discernment causing disgust and anguish, the intuition of Jean Marie and many others confirms to us: that to seek the will of God is to live it, that is to say, to grow more and more in the likeness of Jesus, who is the source of ANALTERABLE PEACE, since His yoke is easy and His burden light.

2- GOD'S PROJECT

God calls and invites to do his will, but this is not about 'some thing', a particular object, hidden, requiring an effort to seek and to pursue.

God's will does not consist in choosing this or that; it involves a choice, after an honest reflection, relieved of both anguish and fear, for the most fruitful, the happiest way of realising your life. This choice takes into account what you are, your past, your history, the encounters that you have made, the perception that you can have of the needs of the Church and the world. What personal response can you give to the calls that you have perceived in the Gospel? What God expects of you, it is not that you choose this or that path that was predestined for all eternity for you. He rather expects you today to give your own response to his presence and his call. It is not a question therefore of observing an established programme but to generate faithfulness?⁷

We therefore need to use another way to express ourselves in the same language that the Bible uses and which has subsequently nourished sources of spiritual life.

⁷ Cf. Michel Rondet, s.j., *Does God have a particular will for each of us ? To want what God wants.* Christus 144.

2.1. Vocabulary for another language

Our concept of the 'will' as a distinct faculty from intellect and from sensibility does not coincide with the term of the Old Testament that the Greek Bible translated by '*thelema*', and the Vulgate by '*voluntas*'.

- The Hebrew term *rason* (*o hps*) denotes the subjective feeling of contentment, aspiration, desire, love, joy... (the same root is used to say that someone is in love, cf. Gn. 34, 19) and this component of 'complacency' is equally rendered by the Greek *eudokia*, 'good looks', which eventually expresses the joy that the Lord feels for his people, the great love he feels for his chosen people (cf. Is 62, 3-5).

In the New Testament, the 'will' of the Father (that is to say, his love, contentment, happiness) rests in Jesus (Mt 3, 17; 17, 5; Mk 1, 11; Lk 3, 32; 2 Ptr 1,17).

- Secondly we cannot make "God's will" coincide with "God's law", since, '*Torah*', the word we translate as 'law' comes from a verb meaning 'to stretch out the hand to show a path', 'to direct', 'to guide', 'to indicate' not appropriate to our legal concept of 'law'.
- Finally, it is important to remember that in Hebrew there is no specific word for 'obey', but the word used is 'listen'. We can obey a 'law', but a word is uttered to us by a person in search of being listened to, of a person-to-person dialogue, of a response.

So here we are invited to turn our gaze to the face rather than to the hands, since slaves "look to the hands of the Lord" (Ps 123, 2), while the characteristics of his sons is to lift up the eyes towards the paternal face. We are called to feel more enveloped and guided by the love that enrolls in the accomplishment of a mandate.

2.2. Love project

- God's first will, his first Desire, it is the salvation of all that he has created and creates. It is not a determination of an absolutely free divine will, but a plan of salvation which expresses the ultimate being of God: Love that gives and communicates itself. "You, Lord, you love all beings and you do not despise anything that you have created; had you hated anything, you would not have created it. How could anything you did not love subsist? (Ws. 11, 24-25)

It is in this same context that Jesus, by inviting us to trust God and to abandon worries, he speaks to us about the lilies of the fields and the birds of the air as Creatures which God takes care of (Lk 12, 22-32 and similar ref.). Similarly, he allows himself to be approached by the poor, the sick and sinners, all excluded from the love and accompaniment of men. He heals and integrates them into human communion.

Before talking about other forms and other manifestations of the will of God, we should talk about this one: what God wants, above all, is a life successful in all that he loves and by loving it he creates it. So that our image of the concept of the 'will' of God does not mislead us, we must expose ourselves a hundred and one times to the first sense.

- God's will is also connected to our involvement in the coming of the Kingdom of God as the reign of inclusion. No categorical imperative here, but rather the emergence in us of the fruit of contemplation: to see the entire world and we in it as creatures issue of the love of God. By entering into this contemplation, we feel that it is impossible to see ourselves created out of the love of God without singing and praising God for that and

without offering ourselves entirely to the service of his Dream of the world.

Therefore, being thus instruments in his hands, collaborators of Christ in his mission, we are part of what God wants and expects of us, his will. His love for us is at the same time his dream for us.

Such is the fundamental sense that Jean-Marie felt and lived when he spoke of his experience of God's will. Everything is an expression of the eternal plan of his love. At the age of 26, which represents a fullness of life and energy, he had to retire from activity, emptying himself... He will discover that all he had, his thoughts, his will, his ways... were God's marks of love and mercy. Such is the core of everything he experienced.

*What is certain, it is that the best of all remedies is to calmly put our own will in that of God, whose thoughts for us are only thoughts of peace, whose meditating on our miserable heart is but a meditation of love.*⁸

This conviction is the firm rock on which he will lean and demand that all those willing to follow Jesus like him must lean.

*There is nothing stable around us, and we ourselves change like everything else; therefore let us not rely on wretched man, a victim of the most unexpected events; **let us rely on God alone**; let us cling to God alone; let our only desire be to always accomplish his holy will, just and merciful will.*⁹

2.3. The project that requires clarity

The love to which the Gospel calls us is a lucid love. If the loving and the following of Christ lacked lucidity, they would

⁸ To Bruté de Rémur, August 16, 1807.

⁹ To the Daughters of Providence, S. VII, p. 2164-65.

weaken and lose their strength. This is not due only to the exterior resistance, the values and the anti-evangelical forces present in society and which resist them to the point of stopping; but inside us, there is a struggle, an intense struggle between impulses and resistances to love.

The best way to understand it is perhaps to quietly meditate on 'Jesus' temptations'.

In the scene of baptism, Jesus hears the voice of the Father. Mathew proclaims that the identity of Jesus consists in being the beloved Son of the Father. Such is his identity, God's will for him: to be the Son, the beloved, and the preferred of the Father, the object of his complacency. And we can understand his going into the desert, moved by the Spirit, as an urgent necessity to 'realise' in silence and solitude, this revelation, to make a place interiorly to amazement and astonishment.

The evangelists present his stay in the desert as a moment of lucidity, by showing us that the filial relationship that Jesus is fully aware of has so illuminated his gaze that from now onwards it is impossible for him to confuse God with idols that the tempter presents him: a god in search of a magician and not a Son (of God); a god contaminated with the empty presentations of the worst human condition: to possess, to shine, to show power and to exercise domination.

In the scene of the temptations, we see Jesus reacting in the same manner as he did in all his life, affectionately bound to what he discovers to be the will of the Father: abundant life to those he came to look for and to save. He did not come to preoccupy himself with his own bread, but to prepare a table where all can sit to eat. He did not come so that the angels carry him on their wings, to acquire fame and "to make himself a name" but to make the Father known and to carry on his shoulders those who are lost, as the shepherd the lost sheep. He did not come to possess, to dominate, to make himself a center,

but to serve and to give life.

The temptations of Jesus, the real temptations dressed in a particular literary style, are always the temptations common to every believer. It is good to see in Jean-Marie, aged 72 and infirm, this little confession to Bishop de la Croix of Azolette, Founder of the Brothers of Southern France. Temptation? Is it an effect of style with humour tainted with irony typical of de La Mennais? In any case there is an astonishing parallelism with the narrative of the temptations of Jesus.

*We have just completed to roof our new building. While we were constructing one and elevating the other by a floor, I was able to return to my former room before Christmas. See then, my Lord, and tell me if it is not really a pity for the 'ignorantin' not to have a somewhat personal room in his old age, having constructed so many houses! May God be blessed in all things!*¹⁰

A believer who infinitely feels himself loved by the merciful God desires to respond to this love and to share it with others. The goal of his research, his discernment, it is to maximally adhere, affectively and effectively, in the personal and historical circumstances, to this project, to this will of God. What he tries to discover, is the concrete manner, in the 'here and now' to identify himself to the Son, to try to resemble him, and to work on what may advance his project.

If the will of God is clear, if the project of Jesus is well defined, why would love need discernment? Why would it require research?...

Because the mediations are a problem, the expenses are unpredictable, the logic is perplexing.

Mediations are a problem: Love, when it is true, claims for the concrete, some gestures and actions. Now the concrete is

¹⁰ To Bishop de la Croix d'Azolette, December 1st, 1852.

always ambiguous, disputable, especially when we are looking for 'the best'. It is on the mediations of love that discernment must be exercised, on the choice to be made.

In fact, it does not suffice, my very dear Sisters, to detach yourselves from these base material goods of whose vanity and nothingness reason itself shows us. You must enter into a more intimate and perfect renouncement; you must be poor in spirit, that is to say, get rid of self love, of all personal interest, of all human desire.... We easily part with a dress, a piece of furniture, a book; but we hung on to an employment, to a mark of esteem and of trust, to a title.¹¹

Expenses are unpredictable: The accomplishment of the will of God in this world is conflicting, it collides with the internal resistances and with external difficulties, it is opposed to other interests, it has a cost. The believer must weigh the relationship between action and cost and, if his love leads him to action, then he pays the expenses. This requires an interior, rational and affective work: it is the way of discernment to 'assume' the will of God.

It is easy to say that we want to entirely belong to God, and who has not said it a thousand times? But how rare is it to fully and strongly want it, ... In the retreat of last year who of us did not decide to belong to God and God alone forever? And yet, during the course of the year that is ending (without going too far) haven't we been embarrassed, shaken in our resolutions, when in certain circumstances that we did not foresee we have experienced some troubles, or met secret difficulties which demanded us a bigger sacrifice than the one we expected to carry out when we entered in the Congregation?¹²

¹¹ Advice to women religious on poverty and obedience, *Sermons II*, 2184.

¹² *Sermons II*, 2447.

Logic is baffling: the ‘logic’ of God, The ‘logic’ of God, his way of doing things is not our way. Identification with God’s will does not only concern the great objectives, with which, definitely, it is not very difficult to identify oneself with, but a way of doing things, a style. There is an evangelical way of acting which does not depend on the usual way of proceeding.

No doubt, since our work is good, it is understandable that we wish it to become stronger, improve and grow. We should even do all that is within our power for that; however, this must be done calmly without too much haste, and without pretending to subject God’s will to ours, and without fixing the date on which it will please Providence to satisfy our need as in the case of a promissory note or cash cheque.¹³

2.4. The breath of Love of an invading gentleness

What ‘saves’ Jesus from falling into the devil’s temptations is his unself-centeredness, the fact that he refers to the Father and to his Word, from where he receives the definitive impetus.

God acts by arousing our desire, our generosity, by activating the noblest enthusiasms and the most altruistic of our being, by giving us ways to discover the “lies” and the traps which are laid before us. God acts by giving interior force, courage, and the capacity to fight... this way of God’s acting, in and outside us, is called in the discernment language of Ignatius, “the good spirit”.

The fight between the “good” and the “bad” takes place within each one of us. It is not body to body: it is subtle. We must

¹³ *Sermons II*, 2459.

sometimes try to look for light and clarity in order to taste the desire of the Lord in our life. It is all about perceptions, of illuminated gazes to see horizons and get on the way.

Jean-Marie has a key text to put into perspective the search of the will of God.

*To remain always in total dependence on the Spirit of God and never sadden Him: to be attentive to what He demands of us; to consult Him often and, when we are uncertain as to what part to take, to ask Him with renewed ardour to be the light of our heart... Det nobis illuminatos oculos cordis.*¹⁴

The context of this passage is very meaningful. It is a text taken from the Memorial, the personal note book of Jean-Marie written from 1st April 1809 (the date we find on the manuscript) and probably up to April 1818. It is of great importance to know his most intimate preoccupations and his way of reacting spiritually.

*In the pages of this spiritual diary, there are some paragraphs, XVII, entitled Spiritual advice: which are a kind of summary of Jean-Marie's spirituality. He corrected them on several times and sent them to a few friends as a vademecum for spiritual accompaniment. The latter quotation is the first one of the pieces of Spiritual advice. In this passage is given as a sort of a cornerstone, the mode of discernment ("when we are unsure of the part that we must take"). We must leave the Spirit (the Spirit of God) illuminate the eyes of the heart.*¹⁵

These illuminations of the Spirit of God, the contemplation of the real with the same eyes of Christ, are usually known by the name of "calls of God": these are the impulses of self-giving, of generosity, of radical commitment,

¹⁴ Memorial p 15 ;

¹⁵ Cf. La Mennais Studies n° 1, p. 37-38.

which we experience as circumstances go by. The attentive Christian in life to God's calls is the "man" or "woman" of discernment.

If we respond to the call "of God, we grow in love and we will taste more and more the joy and peace that the growth of love generates. Otherwise, we will not fail to find the time spent following Jesus empty, boring, insignificant, routine, and without hope.

Finally, "discernment" imposes itself so as to everyday live in the love, so that our life concretely becomes a life sensitive to love, so that our desires and our realisations, affectively and effectively move along with the desire of God. In the means of discernment, we dispose ourselves to collaborate with God, to co-operate with him, in our personal life and our action in the world. We render ourselves "capable" to always coincide more profoundly with his desire; we strive to do his will not like someone who completes a puzzle, but like someone who composes a "symphony". The discerning Christian, the attentive Christian reads life in all its depth, and that enables him to live it very differently: according to the freedom of love, and with a love that makes us free.

This testimony of another Lay person expresses, in a very personal way, the true itinerary of an earnest search of the will of God. With life colours she writes what everyday discernment is.

To want what God wills

If it is sometimes difficult to meet God in the present, when we throw a gaze on our past history and given as a gift, we see how he kept by our side and we are capable of feeling at what cross-roads he enlightened us.

I am going to have a look at the past with you so as to be able to know this pursuit, sometimes up to obsession, in view of accomplishing the

Will of God, and finally to see that the very fact of discerning with Him has rendered it possible to feel that our project belongs only to Him.

The place of our birth is not an accident, nor our own construction from the interior. God enters in our life to the point of becoming an actor on our way of life.

Neither the fact of studying in given field, nor having a normal job, a simple family, or to live in such an ordinary area, in some part of the world is an accident.

What a richness to feel oneself more of a son, to respond to his calls, to the occasions he offers us to grow, to break with, to undertake, to trust and to wait.

The Mennaisian tone is a tone full of vitality. It talks of children, of youths, of making Jesus Christ known... perhaps therein is God's will.

This passionate commitment of following him, to say yes to him, helps us to feel that each day we must serve him, love him, through our concern for others.

Landmarks to make us live a process of trust in Providence, with joy, availability and gratitude.

- When weariness, stress and lack of prayer appear, we discover that we are alienating ourselves from God and everything loses meaning. Activity becomes an empty action and the effort for the Kingdom becomes a personal affair... it is thus that we see that something is amiss.
- The more we live in a freedom with the Gospel as our guide, the more we live in the fullness of his presence.
- The more we want to be at the centre, activists, full of action plans, the more we distance ourselves from his will and fall into the insignificant, in a dead end.
- To live for Him, committed and attentive to his suggestions keeps us away from temptations and the powers that destroy love so much.

When we re-write our past, we find that we are all capable of seeing the traces it has left.

Our God, who loves us so much, stirs and moves us deeply: we can only receive his overflowing love that puts us in motion.

We cannot but feel privileged to have received his Grace and to have been overwhelmed at the discovery of what he had prepared for us.

3. THE DAILY PATH OF DISCERNMENT

Discernment does not involve complicated processes, neither does it require extraordinary resources, otherwise “to want what God wills” would be an objective for the rare spiritual athletes, the elite of holiness and for a small number of the learned. Discernment is not an exercise nor a strategy... but a disposition of evangelical nature: to live as a Christian day after day, searching and desiring, in all purity of heart and righteousness of intention.

- Surprising are the strength and vigour with which Jean-Marie expresses himself when he talks of this disposition of permanent search for the will of God. They come out of his mouth with passion of something lived, which naturally flows from the heart. It is the prayer that constantly goes out of him and the evident roots he has in him, seeing the constancy and permanency of the formulae which end up by appearing befitting.

*My God, may your will always be mine! I have but one desire, never to place the slightest resistance **to what you ask of me:** I entirely give myself to you; do what pleases you with your miserable creature.*¹⁶

(He writes to a priest, his colleague at Saint-Malo, expressing his profound attitude of faith, within a climate of prayer.)

¹⁶ To Fr Langrez, St. Brieuc, May 29, 1814.

*Do to us **what you please**: we have no other will but to accomplish yours in all things, in humiliations, in greatness, in poverty, in wealth, in health, in sickness, in life and in death.*¹⁷

(These were the first words of a sermon he addressed to the Daughters of Providence on his return from the Great Chaplaincy, in Paris.)

*Lord, I am at your feet, like a little child waiting for your orders; I do not want or desire anything else, except **what you will ask of me** for your greater glory. Speak, Lord, and I will obey without hesitation, without complaint, with joy and with love.*¹⁸

(Constant exhortations. Always in a deep and confident disposition.)

- Discernment in everyday life is equal to living everyday life with attention, one of the great necessary virtues in today's Christianity and of the near future. The pedagogy of Christian life must be very attentive to form these qualities of attention: the asceticism of our Christian life must collaborate to keep us awake to this disposition of attention. Then, the act of discernment becomes an easy moment, almost spontaneous, in a growing sensibility to detect, to 'inhale' what is evangelical and what is not.

*It allows us to see that all is sacred, to admire it **and be attentive** to it.*¹⁹

And this fact of being attentive to that involves some reflexes of the heart, like the following:

¹⁷ To the Daughters of Providence, towards 1823, S. VII, p. 2165.

¹⁸ *The opening of the retreat. Obstacles to its fruits*, (1839) *Sermons* II, 2209.

¹⁹ Sermon, *The means to retain the Retreat Fruits*, *Sermons* II, 654.

⇒ A believer is attentive to his capacity to perceive day after day the gift of his life, what he receives from God through people and events of life. It is someone capable of a constant recognition who merits the constant gift of God in his life. He is 'attentive' he who overcomes the temptation of "the evident and natural"; the temptation to think that what we are and have is evident and natural--forgetting that a clear look at the world shows that none of all that is "evident and natural": neither the life, nor the love of those who are around us, nor the work, nor the sense of what we do and live, nor the bread that we eat, nor the roof that shelters us, nor the word that is spoken to us or that which we are able to utter.

To overcome the habitual considerations that prevent us from seeing a Presence and from being grateful: such is the first key to discern. It will form the core of a sermon on the "Marvels of Nature" for teenagers.

*The habit we have, to see the wonders that envelope us, makes us less **attentive**, and we enjoy the benefits of the Creator without **giving him thanks**.*²⁰

Jean-Marie had already noted in his personal notebook, where he carefully wrote his most solid convictions, innate certainty that everything is grace, gift, received gift.

*It is **from the hand of the heavenly Father** that everything comes.*²¹

And in the first Circular that he wrote, on the occasion of the death of Bro. Yves le Fichant, he praised him as a believer who showed "attention" and who recognised in the good that was being done in the presence of the Master of all that is good:

Day by day, the school grew; the progress of the children was fast; they loved the good Brother that attracted

²⁰ *Sermons* II, 543.

²¹ *Memorial*, 84.

and charmed them by his softness; docile to his pieces of advice, that they listened to with religious respect, they corrected their faults, so much so that at the end of a few months, all the inhabitants of the town sang his praises. For him, deaf to this noise vain glory, he only thought of thanking God for His favors.²²

⇒ Attention gives the capacity to look ahead, not to go in life ‘headlong’. Christian attention is not of the one imbued solipsistic thoughts, but that of the Good Samaritan. Look ahead in different ways: at our worries and problems, at our small horizons, at our plans and projects, at those who always tell us yes or who think like us, at our geographical and cultural limits... In our time, looking ahead often involves an effort, a conscious decision, upsetting, against the current. One needs to strive to “get out” of so many things: of ourselves, of our worlds, of our habitual milieu, of our prejudices always prompt to solidify.

Jean-Marie de la Mennais is a man with a dilated look; horizontally and in depth. He is capable of seeing a lot of things and, above all, to see them better. To pierce through the real and discover in it its most profound meaning. And to be on the look ‘out’. Thus he went through life: by looking at it, in all its depth, with eyes always open to God’s surprises, that call and ask, that invite and engage joyfully.

The reality he lives is for him a call. His eyes are attentive since his childhood to discover in it the will of love and salvation. The reality which is more than a vocation, presents itself to him as a pro-vocation challenge

The call of Pope Francis to the Church has been an urgent invitation to “go forth”.

A Church “which goes forth”. In the word of God this dynamism of “going forth” that God wants to provoke in the

²² *Tribute to Brother Yves le Fichant. Sermons II, 2345.*

*believers appears constantly... Every Christian and every community will discern the way that the Lord asks for, but we are all invited to accept this call: to go out of one's own comfort and have the **courage** to reach all the peripheries that need the light of the Gospel.*²³

The first call of Jean-Marie and the response of the first Brothers are inserted in this regard towards going ahead and in the dynamism of the “going forth”.

Leave your country, your family; sacrifice everything: go, teach these poor little children that ask for the bread of education, and who are exposed to perish because there is no one to break it and distribute it to them.²⁴

This impulse of going forth rises from a vision, from a compassionate look that makes it possible to express itself clearly as the will of salvation of the God-Love.

*Seeing this multitude of children who call us to run to their rescue, who pray us and we adjure to be merciful as regards their fate, to save them from death and eternal death with which they are threatened, no human interest will prevent us; **we will go forth towards them**, we will take them in our arms, and we will tell them: Dear children whom Jesus our Savior, has loved so much, whom he has deigned to embrace and bless, come to us, stay with us; we are going to be the guardian angels of your innocence; we will be your defenders and your fathers; we will devote ourselves for you; no sacrifice will seem too great for us to save you !*²⁵

⇒ The “attention” is also in connection with a certain capacity of active memory, of a historical conscience and of the reading of this history, of putting in perspective what happens to us. It is a question of overcoming the enormous weight that the

²³ *Evangelii gaudium* 20.

²⁴ *Sermons*, VII, p. 2242.

²⁵ *Reread the life and in it reread God*. S. VII, p. 2271

atmosphere of immediacy has over us, which makes the present absolute without its being clarified by the past and open to the future. This is serious especially when it is a matter of the relationship with God and listening to him: because the way God calculates time is surely not ours, because he habitually puts much more time in his issues than we would desire. And because God does not have our instantaneous evidence, he generally favours their rootedness, the acquisition of their density and of their true value.

Examine life to see in it the aroma of Lord's passage, examine it to be able to perceive the steps of Someone who has collaborated with our freedom to weave and work out the history of salvation. That is what Jean-Marie used to do.

When I think of this tiny grain of mustard seed that I planted forty years ago, without knowing what it would become but with the protection of Divine Providence, it gives me much pleasure, after so many years of work and trials, to see today your work developing more and more in Brittany, establishing itself in southern France and spreading overseas. On seeing this, I cannot but be confounded myself and cry out with the Scriptures: "Yes, the hand of God is there!" (cf. Lk 11, 20).²⁶

Examine the mission and the persons who go through the same path as ours and see God's time which does not always coincide with our impatient time, sometimes leading to anxiety.

The account you give me concerning all the good being done in our schools fills me with sweet joy, and it is for us an additional motive to hope that this work will grow like the grain of mustard seed of the Gospel that became a big tree. But we must be a little patient and know how to wait for God's appointed time.²⁷

²⁶ Circular for the retreat of 1857.

²⁷ To Bro. Arthur Greffier, April 2nd, 1843.

*My God, perhaps our crimes will force your justice to permit that the wicked triumph and prevent us from doing good this evening; but, my God, your mercy still gives us freedom to do good this morning. Ah! My God, we shall do good this morning, glorifying your mercy.*²⁸

⇒ The “attention” is also the capacity to go closer, and correct that, which for many reasons, does not attract attention. That which we despise because it is small, which we avoid because it challenges, which we prefer to ignore because it is embarrassing, which we are tempted to avoid because it hurts. If God looked at us in this way, we would not be saved, we who are small, incoherent, covered with wounds and ugly. Finally look more into what is offered to us, what is presented before our eyes, more or less interested: not look at what excites us, but what affects us, not what attracts us but which questions us, not what we acquire with money, but what claims our hearts.

Thanks to this active talent of attention, each day will surely have its share of God’s calls that will resound in us. The impetus will respond to it, resistances will be activated: the movement we called discernment will be set in motion. It is in this movement that we will construct with God’s grace, our concrete, generous, active and loving yes of God who has seduced us and for whom we are passionate. This is what it means to search for the will of God and live according to it daily. If we live in recognition, looking beyond ourselves, attentive to the thread of life, letting ourselves to be “touched” by what would be hidden from our eyes, then the calls of God will resonate strongly in our heart. His love will be active in our daily lives.

.....

²⁸ To M. Bruté de Rémur, July 18, 1807.

The following testimony does not enter into the frame-work of other testimonies in the note book, elaborated by the Brothers or the Mennaisian Laity.

It is a testimony of a lay person: Madeleine Delbrel, social worker, a Christian mystic, who lived her faith in the workers milieu of the outskirts of Ivry-sur Seine, where the municipal authorities were communists. It is there she discovered the will of God, or better, his concrete will, in everyday circumstances.

The raptures of your own will

When those we love ask us for something, we thank them for asking for it.

If it pleased you, Lord, to ask only one thing from us in all our life, we would stay amazed,
and to have done your will only once would be the event of our destiny.

But because every day, every hour, every minute
you put into our hands such an honour, we find it so natural
that we are indifferent about it, we are tired of it.

And yet, if we understood at what point is your unthinkable
mystery, we would remain stupefied to be able to know the
sparks of your will which are our little chores

We would be dazzled to know,
in this vast darkness that cover us,
the innumerable,
the specific, the personal lights of your Will.

The day that we would understand that, we would go through
life as types of prophets,
as seers of your little acts of Providence,
as agents of your interventions.

Nothing would be mediocre, because everything would be
willed by you.

Nothing would be too heavy, for everything would be rooted in
you.

Nothing would be sad, for everything would be according to
your will.

Nothing would be boring,
for everything would be for love of you.

We are all predestined to ecstasy,
called to get out of our poor plans, to rise up, hour after hour, in
your plan.

We are never lamentably abandoned but happy to be
called to know what you expect of us every moment: people
who are a little bit necessary, people whose actions you would
miss if we refused to do them.

The ball of cotton thread to mend, the letter to write, the child
to raise, the husband to cheer,
the door to open, the receiver to lift
the headache to bear:

so many stepping stones to ecstasy,
so many bridges to pass from our poor and bad will, to the
Serene Shore of your good pleasure.

Madeleine Delbrêl

La joie de croire aux Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1968

4- MAY YOUR WILL BE DONE

It has already been mentioned above, but it must be repeated with the same Mennaisian insistence as that which appears in the sermons and the letters to the Brothers: the accomplishment of the will of God deeply goes through the life experience of Jean-Marie. And the formula where it appears in the *Our Father* springs up here and there in his words with redoubled insistence:

*May God's be will done!*²⁹ Farewell, my son, may God's holy will be done.³⁰

This is the verbatim transcript of the same words of Jesus in Gethsemane: "Not my will, but thine be done" (Luke 22, 42)

If we let the sentence resonate, said by us, certainly we shall receive the echoes in a tone of resignation, of submission and painful reception. "Thy will be done" can be a word uttered with an accent of a forced acceptance as the ultimate outcome of painful situations from which we cannot free ourselves. Jean-Marie, on a certain occasion in his life, lived the will of God with this resigned attitude. When he tells in one of the letter the painful situation in which his father and uncle found themselves, that is, the economic hardships they had to go through, he comments:

*May God's will be done! I lovingly resign myself to it.*³¹

²⁹ To Bruté de Rémur, May 11, 1818.

³⁰ To Fr Langrez, August 5, 1814.

³¹ To Miss de Cornulier.

And in some of the letters in which he responds to situations of complaints, of difficulties not assumed by the Brothers, he will equally speak to them of resignation:

*I want to see you more resigned to the holy will of God.*³²

However, the accomplishment of God's will ("Thy will be done") goes beyond sheer conformity, of simple respect. Very suggestive is the letter written to Brother Méloir-Marie (Jean-François Lefebvre). The context makes the content of words even more meaningful. This Brother, born in 1813, entered the novitiate on March 15, 1833. He has to interrupt his novitiate in 1834 because of a chest sickness and dies in 1835 when he was still very young. In 1834, the Founder wrote to him:

*Be perfectly resigned to his holy will. Want what God wills and want it always, in everything, without reserve. Therein lies the kingdom of God whose coming we ask him for every time we say the Our Father.*³³

In the "Thy will be done" it is a joy to feel how the Kingdom of God is established and the reception of his will.

4.1. Word of the new creation

Luke presents us the key to the accomplishment of the will of God in Mary in his last words at the end of the scene of the Annunciation: in it we discover that the accent is not put on her own initiative, on her decision or her will ("I am going to do ..., I will do what the Lord has told me ..."), but on the consent to an action that that needs only the emptiness and receptive availability such as the earth before the creative Word of God." Let there be light" (Gen 1,3), God said then; "Be it done to me ...",

³² To Bro. Ambroise le Haiget, February 9th, 1837.

³³ To Bro. Méloir-Marie, no date, 1834.

now says Mary, the woman of the New Creation, welcoming in herself the presence of the same Spirit which “hovered over the waters” (Gen 1, 2) on the morning of the first creation.

“Let it be done” is the expression that Mary uses to show her openness to the eruption of God’s will in her life. On her lips, there is not only an expression of submission, but also a joyous expression of the fullness of welcoming the creative Word and creating with her. In the opening, in the responsiveness to the will, a new creation is installed.

To want what God wills, is not accomplishing something already fixed, going through paths that have always been trodden, but creating with the Creator. "The response that we will give to God is not registered anywhere, neither in the book of life, nor even in God's heart, if not as an expectation and a hope. The hope of what God does not yet see, and to which we go, we, to give it form and face. It is the greatness and the risk of our lives to be so called to awaken the joy of God by the quality and generosity of our response ... In this personal creative effort in response to God's call, the Spirit joins us, not as an external force which would be imposed on us, but as an inner energy aroused in us..."³⁴

In this context of understanding, Jean-Marie, precisely on the very day of the feat of St. John, his patron saint, requested his friend Bruté for prayers so that the creator pronounces creative word on him.

‘Ask God, therefore, to create a pure heart in me, a heart that loves him! Ask him to grant me the grace to belong to him and to him alone forever. Fiat, fiat!’³⁵

³⁴ Michel Rondet, *Christus* 144, p. 395-396.

³⁵ To M. Bruté de Rémur, June 22nd, 1809.

4.2. Words born from the joy of being Son

"The will of God - Jesus could have said - is like a treasure hidden in a field. A man having found it, with all the joy, went to sell everything to buy that field."

To accomplish the will of God is not voluntarism, not of conviction, not of resignation, it is not a repetition of a sentence like "duty first, duty always", but it is "all for Joy", all for the secret joy of knowing of being in possess of something of great value. This is the very thing that made Jesus say: " I have food that you do not know: to do the will of my Father "(Jn 4, 34), food, that is to say, something that produces pleasure, vitality, growth, fulfillment and joy.

Also, the words of Jesus that express the most dense moments of his life and which coincide with his most unconditional obedience are always preceded by a prayer of trust to the Father that reveals, not the respect of a submissive slave but the communion, the affinity, the profound adherence of a Son who trusts. "Father, if you will, take this chalice away, but not my will, but thine "(Lk 22: 42).

This filial sense is lived from day to day into the fabric of the existence in a co-natural way as a gift and grace. It is particularly evocative to read in Jean-Marie this familiarity with the literal words and sentiments of Jesus, which makes them pass to everyday life, to the lights and to shadows of everyday existence.

You have certainly heard of the misfortune that befell my family (insolvency). My father and my uncle have surrendered to their creditors all their possessions. Such a painful step is a new proof the honesty which was always for them more dear than the riches, and which, after fifty years of toil is today the only possession they remain with. Their old age will be painful; but God wants it that way. Let us not

*stop adoring and blessing his holy will: non sicut ego volo, sed sicut tu (Mt 26:39).*³⁶

This recourse to God, Father-Mother, that surrounds us with his love and mercy is constant in its spiritual direction and its animation of communities.

*Thus my daughter, be at peace, not because you are good, but because God is good, because he is Father.*³⁷

*All around us, nothing is stable, and we ourselves keep changing like the rest. Thus, we should not at all count on the miserable man, a prey of the most unforeseen events. Let us rely on God alone; let us stick to God alone; let us desire but the accomplishment of his always **holy will**, **always just and always merciful**.*³⁸

It is precisely this affinity with the Father that the eldest son in Luke's parable (Luke 15, 28-32) and the young man who did not follow Jesus because he had great wealth (Mk 10, 22) lacked. Both appear disqualified by the evangelists, despite their correct presentation of the point of view of fulfilling the commandments, regulations and rules. It is the essential for God that they lacked: to one the joy to work not 'for' his father, but 'with him' in his own house; to the other the trustful audacity to depart from the strict commandment to enter in what could not be the object of accomplishment but of the passionate pursuit.

The Our Father is, once again, the open door which opens us the way to obedience to the image of the Son. Before "thy will be done" he teaches us to say: "Father!", putting us in contact with the sources of filial trust of the present of the existence received, affirmed, "graced" by him in the quiet certainty of knowing oneself to be in good hands.

³⁶ To Mr. de la Guérétie, St. Malo, September 17, 1813.

³⁷ To Miss Jallobert, in *Mémorial*, 126.I.

³⁸ To the Daughter of Providence, S. VII, p. 2164-65.

4.3. Passing from «accomplishment» to «adherence»

There is a very frequent verb in the Deuteronomic language *dabaq* (to adhere, to stick, to cling, to unite, to fasten) that expresses the attitude that the Lord expects of his people, "Choose the Life and you will live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God and his will and holding fast to him, for he is your life" (Deuteronomy 3, 19; cf. Dt 4, 4 ; 13, 5).

My soul clings to you," says the author of Psalm 63; and in a precious picture of his book, Jeremiah compares God to Israel with a belt around his waist, "... thus had I to make Israel adhere to me, all the house of Israel to be my people, my reputation, my honor and my glory ..." (Jr 13, 11)

Physical adhesion becomes an image that is born of the union of the personal relationship of friendship or love: the author of Genesis narrative reflects on the mysterious attraction that arises between man and woman leading them to unite (*daqab*) to make only one flesh (Genesis 2, 24). Hamor "attaches" himself to Dina, the daughter of Jacob, and talks to her from the heart (Gn 34, 3). And Ruth "adheres" to the fate of Noemie, her mother-in-law, saying: "Where you will go, I will go; wherever you will live, I will live; thy people shall be my people, thy God will be my God; wherever you will die, I will die and be buried. Only death will be able to separate us" (Ruth 1, 17).

The Lord demands of his people this same attitude: "Choose life and you will live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by being obedient to his will and by holding fast to him, for he is thy life" (Dt 30, 19). "My heart clings to you" recognised a suppliant (Psalm 63, 8). And another proclaims: "I adhere to your precepts, do not disappoint me" (Ps 119, 31).

There is a strong emotional component in these texts, an

irresistible attraction that grabs the one that resolves not to isolate himself or separate himself from what makes him live. He is like a tree planted near a river (Ps 1, 3) or a branch on the vine that benefits from its sap (Jn 15, 47).

These are "important" images that turn pale a big part of the classical terminology when talking about the relationship with God (all who talk about "accomplishing" God's will, "keep His commandments", "observe his laws" ...). They force us to position ourselves at another level; they put us in touch with the life experience of lovers in search of being together and united with the same intensity of roots of a tree searching for water, a branch the sap of the vine and the ivy firmness of the trunk. They both know, in their way, that they cannot be who they are until they adhere, they are rooted, they live, they mingle and burst out into what gives them a name and the possibility of existence. Nobody dictates to them from the outside; it is their own desire to be and live that which grabs them from the exterior, which makes them adhere blindly to what gives them consistency and direction.

We can also know it if we decide to change our old reflexes for this Other to which Jesus has risked himself before us : "not my name, but yours"; "not my glory, but thine; "not my will, but yours ..."; "not my life, but theirs"...

But for that, one needs to believe a lot, you have to adventure to go beyond resistances and fears and the desire "to do the will of God" with the same impatience as the Psalmist: "May thy tenderness touch me and I will live!" (Ps 119, 77).

It is, at best, the will of God (his kindness, his desire, his love, his joy, his deepest desire for us) is that we believe passionately that this will which is his is all grace.

In this line fits the whole theology of Jean-Marie on "relationships". It all proceeds from the basic conviction that we basically adhere to God. He is the centre, the deepest core of

ourselves, and it is only in him that we can find the true source of happiness and personal fulfillment.

*Let us adhere by indissoluble ties to this great God, for he is the principle, the source and the fullness of all good. We are on earth to know, love and serve him; to love only him alone forever; to always strive towards him with all the strength of our being; let us have no other sentiment deep in our heart. other thought; our submission to his laws, our union with him will make us happy in time and will still do it again in eternity.*³⁹

From this fundamental adhesion is born the connections of mutual love, of community life, the deep roots of the service of children and youths.

*Do love one another as brothers, as members of the same family; may the sweet bonds of charity unite your hearts and make of them but one heart in Jesus Christ.*⁴⁰

*From time to time, I will revisit them; we shall strengthen more and more the ties that unite us, the ties that even death will not break.*⁴¹

In difficult times without bonds and without stable faithfulness, as it was in the time of exile, the Psalmist asked: “may my tongue stick to my palate if I remember you not Jerusalem, you, Jerusalem!” (Ps 137, 6). Jean-Marie has the same strong accents, heartbreaking, not to mention our relationships, our vital adhesions.

Do not consider your vocation only in respect of your own interests, but consider also the essential ties that your state entails regarding the multitude of children whose eternal destiny is, in some way, in your hands. See if you want them to live or if you want them to die, and take note

³⁹ *Sermons* II, 1145.

⁴⁰ *Sermons* II, 2129.

⁴¹ *Sermons* II, 2136.

*that by pronouncing their sentence you pronounce yours as well.*⁴²

To have a need of the experience of the other Brothers in faith helps us to convert our resistances to say the "Amen" which makes us resemble the Son; a process that can last a lifetime. The following testimony is of a lay person and evolves in this line, by describing the struggle to empty oneself and let the Presence to which we adhere appear because it holds us back.

D. + S

...Dare to go ahead...

Beyond the mental, without abandoning the mental...

Beyond the emotional without abandoning the emotional...

Further and more real, here is an inner place that we call HARA: vital centre, place of gestation, space for meeting the Spirit that lives in us and envelopes us.

The way to to get there is that of solitude...

The word to initiate it is that of silence...

And there, in solitude and silence, in the interior space,

beyond plans and projects,

beyond love and lovers,

⁴² *Sermons II, 2230.*

The word espouses the silence and the presence penetrates the Present...

it is there that your desire of Being is gratified, of being in fullness.

The dialogue, which began from eternity begins with a "yes", and in him I discover that your will does not coincide with mine, may the "yes" that hurts, however small it may be, because wanting what you want does not enter into the views of my ego; because it brings forth the "yes" of your life in my life I have to say "no" to what belongs to me, my plans, my ideas and my first loves and deceptions.

And there, in the secret and hidden dialogue, you decentre me from my projects, you detach me from my affections, because you want that Your Plans and Your Presence be my centre, my horizon and my sense.

Rebellion, resistance...

It is not a question of wanting what You want, if I have to lose my little wills...

Then, your arms embrace and wrap me entirely and I hear the murmurs of your voice in this interior place:

"Have no fear. I am with you always and forever,

Trust me and you will feel supported"

It is thus that every time I decentre myself, I confide myself to You and abandon myself to the "MAY IT BE SO TO ME" I spread my wings and you teach me to fly.

God alone in time.

God alone in eternity.

5. LETTING GOD SEARCH FOR US

There are some minor questions, almost always focused on us, "Where are you, Lord?" "Where can I find your will?"... important questions for sure, but we forget the first question, the essential question, the one that appeared first, detached from the challenging interrogations in the Bible: "Where are you?" to Adam in (Genesis 3, 9).

This call of YHWH in the book of Genesis (like that of Jesus knocking at the door Rev 3, 20), calls us to change the direction of the arrow. The "search for God" changes the meaning because when we go round our questions: "where can God be? Why does he hide himself? How can we find him?" The question has a "boomerang" effect: Where are we, why do we hide? Why are we afraid of letting ourselves meet with his Presence? Why does it cost us to open the door for him to dine with us?...

It is true that we must do things for him, desire and search for him, but especially by recognising that what is more important for us is answering his desire, persevering in waiting, coming out of our hiding places and letting ourselves be found.

The "grace" of the Gospel consists in living Christian life as something demanding our initiative, our effort and dedication and, at the same time, to live it as a free gift offered to useless servants, that we ultimately are.

To believe is not to have a display of dogmas, but to open oneself to the surprise of seeing God looking for us, having plans, initiatives and words to guide us. And if he knocks at our door, it's because he wants to dine with us; the

*first thing we can also do is to agree to believe the unbelievable: that his desire for communion and intimacy always precedes ours; it's for him that our presence presents a gift; it is He who has plans, initiatives and words to guide us, and that the best thing to do is to open the door and welcome him.*⁴³

That is why, at the moment of looking for ways, places and moments to identify where we can find God (and his willingness to salvation), we must change our conception and consent to our being found by him. The Rule of Life, Directory n°6, tells us:

*It is **in community** that the Brother seeks God and exercises his apostolate, and that he tries **to discern the will of God by listening to the Word of God and by reading the signs of the times.***⁴⁴

5.1. In community

Christian discernment as such is, Christian activity, ecclesial action, action in communion with the Church. There is no authentic Christian discernment outside ecclesial communion. Three points should at least be considered here:

➤ **The ecclesial aspect:**

The unity of believers and their values are within the framework of reference where personal discernments are situated. The Rule of Life points it out at different places:

A community, rich in inspirations and thoughts of its members, in whom the Spirit speaks and acts, is a privileged place of seeking for the will of God. The Superior participates in this collective approach, but it belongs to him to make

⁴³ Cf. La Mennais Studies, n° 1, "To receive oneself from God".

⁴⁴ Directory 6.

*decisions that are required.*⁴⁵

That which is vital in discernment, is "the colour and the particular flavour" that the Gospel acquires in our Congregation, the Mennaisian orchestration of the great Gospel melodies. There is no need to discern the "option for the poor": it is already clearly affirmed by the Church. But the object of discernment is how I, here and now, put them into practice. There is no need to discern whether or not I must evangelise: I have to discern where and how to evangelise the children and the youth, now. The community is the privileged place to recognise and accept the will of God.

In this regard, according to the teaching of Jean-Marie, the theme of attention and obedience to superiors recurs in the rule, as places where God meets us as an improvised and not as a gift sought for. In Sermons and Letters, the theme of the importance of the rule is extensively discussed.

*Of all the graces given to religious by God, perhaps the greatest is to have given them rules.*⁴⁶

*Engrave it in the depth of your heart. Meditate it unceasingly. May it be your delight and your guide. Faithfully and lovingly obey it, in little as well as big endeavours, convinced that it does not contain a single word that is the true expression of the holy will of God. God, faithful to his promise, will extend his hand over you because you will have chosen his commandments as your portion.*⁴⁷

In this same line, each Brother's attention is drawn to obedience to superiors.

Walk with simplicity on the humble road of obedience. Live day by day, without too much forethought, and never wanting anything except what

⁴⁵ Rule of Life. Constitutions n° 33

⁴⁶ Cf. *Manual of Piety*, 1927.

⁴⁷ To the Brothers, *Sermons* VII, 2359-2364.

*God wants. Rejoice in the certitude of doing his adorable will when you do what your superiors tell you; consequently, may their judgement always be your rule.*⁴⁸

➤ ***Accompanied discernment***

The real Christian discernment is generally an "accompanied" discernment. Someone else, more or less frequent, more or less intense, helps me to discern (he does not discern or take decisions on my behalf). He echoes what I tell him, he prompts me; he makes me realise my reactions. This accompaniment is 'mediation'; it renders present the ecclesial community in my discernment. In fact, in the same way our faith proceeds from a Christian community, it needs this same community to mature.

If we analyse the letters of Jean-Marie, beyond organisational elements, we always find this accompaniment, this help the Brothers to discover the hand of God in their life, by reflecting upon situations they lived so that they can discover by themselves the hand and the prints of God in their life.

*The sentiments that you express are prompted by God, and I thank him for putting them in your heart: be always alert to the enemy of your salvation who will try to persuade you that God calls you to a state other than that of Brother.*⁴⁹

*I find that there is too much excitement and bitterness in your complaints against the way certain people sometimes deal with you. An authentic religious has more gentleness and patience.*⁵⁰

Discernment is not always evident. It requires a moment

⁴⁸ To Bro. Étienne-Marie Malenfant, February 12, 1843.

⁴⁹ To Bro. Liguori-Marie Langlumé, and his confrères, July 4, 1848.

⁵⁰ To Bro. Élisée Dupas, April 26, 1847.

of help and accompaniment, of prayer to know how to wait for the moment of God. In that, Jean-Marie also educated the Brothers:

*Examine carefully if the desire you have explained to me comes from God. I would not assent to it immediately as time must be taken to think it over and over again... Pray God, then, to enlighten you and to heal you of all your weaknesses.*⁵¹

*You might have been surprised at my long silence, and you would not have known what occasioned it: nothing is simpler though: it was due to the uncertainty in which I have been for four months...I have already exhorted you to be patient, and I exhort you once again, for things never go according to our desires.*⁵²

➤ **Community discernment**

"Community discernment does not replace the nature and functions of the authority, to whom belongs the final decision, however, the authority cannot ignore that the community is the privileged place for recognising and welcoming God's will. In all cases, discernment is one of the most important moments of consecrated fraternity, where stands out with particular clarity the central character of God as the ultimate end of the search of all, as well as the responsibility and the contribution of each in the journey of all towards the truth." These are the splendid words of the text "The Service of authority and obedience" of 11th May, 2008, CIVCSVA.

For Jean-Marie, the community is an important element of confrontation because he considers the community as a place of truth, where one takes stock of himself and where one makes himself the light. The Brothers are a decisive help to discover our

⁵¹ To Bro. Euthyme Moy, December 21, 1840.

⁵² To Bro. Arthur Greffier, November 24, 1840.

truth, the paths in our move towards the Lord according to his life and example.

How many people imitate Pilate! Quid est veritas? (What is truth?), he asked the One who was the Eternal Truth, and he went away without waiting for the answer. For us, M. C. (My Children), it will not be the same; we will be surrounded by the love of our Superiors and our Brothers who with kindness and frankness will give us salutary advice; even though our self-esteem suffers and is irritated, we will bless the good Lord for having given us such a valuable and necessary help to our weakness.⁵³

Yes, my children, I love you in Jesus Christ, and for Jesus Christ. I am thirsty, if I may say so, for your happiness and for your salvation. You and I make but one body; we have but the same interests, the same desires and the same goal. We want to go to heaven, by obtaining the glory of God, according to the measure of our means and of our strength. Oh! Let us unite ourselves more and more in this thought. Let us try, my dear children, to help one another to become saints, and for that, let each one give to his brothers the example of gentleness, patience, humility and the fidelity to the Rule of Life.⁵⁴

We synthesise this chapter with a quote from a Jesuit expert on the topic of Ignatian discernment. He writes in a direct and brief summary.

“With regard to the active evangelical discernment, we have insisted very much in the Church, and it is necessary to do it for the individual discernment, which is the basis of all discernment. We have insisted less, though sufficiently, on community discernment: on this point we have put more emphasis on the theoretical than on the practical phase. This is not bad either, but it would be better if we practised it

⁵³ *Sermons II, 2410.*

⁵⁴ *Sermons II, 2734.*

more or less. There remains a deficiency that we often encounter in these times of crises and suffering, where we are very busy, where we have less personal and economic resources, and yet social emergencies are more important: We have put much less emphasis on the institutional discernment and we have hardly practised it : that from which we bring into play our personal, economic and institutional resources.”⁵⁵

Jean-Marie did it in a permanent manner that enabled him to risk himself on all educational fronts, especially those most in need, to re-found the Congregation 18 years after its foundation ... He moved forward with the breath of the Spirit, with Providence as the only sure guarantee of success.

⁵⁵ Darío Mollá Llácer, *Keys to christian spiritualité for times of suffering*.

The following testimony is of a Brother who is now retired. He gives us chance to re-read for ourselves what has taken place in his life since his early age; the search of God's will: personal research and in community; in the diversity of tasks and missions; in animation and service.

TO WILL WHAT GOD WILLS

Life is a patient educator. Just like the Lord who gives it to us minute by minute. And I have taken a long time in life to realise that the Lord's ways and ours do not always coincide.

I started my journey as a religious when I was very young. The context of that time literally carried us and I felt very comfortable when I aligned myself with the guidelines proposed by my superiors. There was a certain reassuring automatism and jitters were well identified.

Then came a gradual maturation time where I little by little decided to assert myself as an autonomous person. Well knowing the role of the superiors, I felt the need of a personal affirmation: and it loomed as a career plan where I felt comfortable to take a bit of initiative.

The first experience of a resourceful year allowed me to do the deep pint and reflect on what Jean-Marie de la Mennais wanted for his Brothers. That's when I questioned the perception of my journey to be able to say to the Lord "Now it is no longer I who have the control, but you. Tell me what you want."

And his response did not delay. The missions that were entrusted to me did not match at all with what I had imagined. I realised that to fulfill the will of God was to make myself available and attentive. And coincidentally I learned quickly to

replace this word with that of Providence- I found out that the stages that I franchised prepared the next step, in a way that my criteria for discerning changed: seeking for the will of God required an attentive listening and the enlightenment of the great family community.

I must admit that our communities had some difficulty to realise the important role they had in this search for God's will. We looked for how to make the necessary discernment, we had difficulty to trust each other and community animators were a little uncomfortable in their role. Community projects were well developed in some areas, but much less clear in others.

For me, the experience of searching for the will of God was well lived when I got the experience of the plan of Providence and of the congregation. An experience is not always obvious, but a well-stated desire to emulate the spirit of Jean-Marie. The second year of renovation permitted me to better adapt to the enthusiasm of the Founders.

Today, it is by community proximity and the life style in my community that we get to discern together the paths that the Lord indicates for us, at moments or time where listening and praying captures the greater part of our lives.

5.2. On listening to the Word

"Son of man, look with your eyes, listen with your ears, and put your heart into everything I am going to show you ..." the Prophet Ezekiel heard one day (Ezekiel 40: 2). To put our heart in what God shows us, is it not a wonderful way to express the fulfilment of God's will? The words of Prophet Ezekiel translated nowadays communicate to us the conviction that God is still giving us 'signs of life' and we must be like sentries or as a radar to capture the 'vibration' of his Presence and his word. God, constantly "sends out signals" to us and there is no place or conditions 'off the network' communication with Him.

This is the great testimony that the believers of the Bible give us: on flipping its pages we find them coming into relationship with God and his Word by the well (Gen 24), at the seaside (Ex 15, 1ff), in the middle of the tumult of the crowd or in the desert (Mt 4, 1-11), by a tomb (Jn 11, 41), with a child in the arms (Gen 21, 15), at the foot of the nuptial bed (Tb 8,5) and surrounded by lions (Dan 6, 23).

At the time of entering into contact with God to listen to Him, they are not necessarily in the attitudes of the soul that are most favourable: they enter into communication with God when they are happy, but also when they are furious; they cry to Him at the edge of unbelief, of rebellion, of skepticism; they bless Him or they reproach Him, depending on whether they are at the top of trust or in the depth of despair.

We learn from this that it is not so difficult, for many people before us have listened to God and have let His word touch and transform them. This was the conviction in the heart of Jean-Marie when he noted in his note book, the Memorial, as the central point of Christian life:

One should listen to God in meditation, open the ears of our heart to receive his sacred word and feed on this manna

*of suavity, so as to not lose any of it, but really taste and relish it with delight. Audiam quid loquatur in me Dominus Deus.*⁵⁶

Regarding the daily familiarity with the Word of God (the daily *Lectio Divina*) Father de la Lamennais did not reserve it to the elite in spirituality, but it was only an emphasis in the talks he used to give to groups of adolescents and youths he animated: the "congreganists".

If Jesus Christ, my dear children, declared that he who hears and keeps his word is happier than the most holy Virgin herself who bore Him in her womb, with what lively gratitude must we listen to the lessons the Gospel gives us! We must receive them as if the Lord spoke himself, for his disciples have faithfully transmitted the instructions that came from his mouth to us. They are written so that, until the end of the world, all those who are fortunate to belong to him should hear the voice of Jesus Christ. Let us then open the ears of the heart, so that this word of truth penetrates and nourishes our soul. We should never let a day pass without reading some passages from this sacred book; it is the will of our Father; it is the deposit of his promises; it is the collection of his speeches, and the history of his life. We could not meditate on it with too much attention, and it is deplorable that the greater part of Christians do not know what it contains. Therefore, I would like that each of you have a New Testament and that every morning you read, if not a chapter, at least a few verses following the example of our Fathers whose sweetest consolation was to study the holy books. Their fear of not profiting from the words of Jesus Christ was equal to their fear of profaning his Body itself, when they were fortunate to receive it in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The word of God has by itself a

⁵⁶ *Memorial*, 18-19.

*supernatural virtue, and its effects are marvellous.*⁵⁷

The prayerful reading of the Word of God, the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* reminds us with perfect clarity, is another place that proposes to us a way where the will of God will be presented to us.

*"By frequenting the Word of God, they received the light of individual and communal discernment which helped them to seek the Lord's ways in the signs of the times. They thus acquired a kind of supernatural instinct that allowed them not to conform to the mentality of the world, but to renew their minds in order to be able "to discern what the will of God is, what is good, what pleases Him, what is perfect" (Rom 12, 1)."*⁵⁸

5.3. Reading the signs of the times

To discover the will of God, which appears to us at every turn of life and which brings us contradiction, we must adopt a pilgrim's vocation that scrutinises the signs of the times to know where we should go, or the strategy of a water diviner who detects sources, which requires that his sensibility be refined to be put to good use.

Sound discernment takes into account all possible data, because in everything there can be God's calls or elements of contradiction. Not only the internal data, inner processes or internal repercussions of the external phenomena; but also the exterior events themselves, the facts of life and reality, analysed and perceived in the best way possible. Behind the facts, the events and the real life stories, there are often decisive data for our discernment. Let us not forget that God's desire is a desire on and for the world, that the "will" of God is, as St. Ignatius

⁵⁷ To the Congreganists, on the mass, *Sermons* III, 927-8.

⁵⁸ *Vita Consecrata* 94.

reminds us in one of the important pages of the Exercises (101-109), a will of salvation that is born of a close look at the complexity of the world. "As he stepped ashore, Jesus saw a great multitude; he was moved and began to heal the sick." Mt 14, 14): it is the view of the world which "activates" Jesus. It cannot be Christian, to follow Jesus by blind discernment of the reality of the world, turned to self, ignoring those who are the protagonists and the beneficiaries of the project and the desire of God: the men and women of this world, particularly those that are suffering.

Discernment has primarily as its goal to breathe the air of the will of God, to know in which direction it takes us. Thus Jean - Marie exercised his discernment, knowing how to see the hand of God in his history, like a hand that leads towards paths that were never expected or thought of:

➔ He had never thought of founding, but events impose it on him (the refusal of the de la Salle Brothers in the cases of the Brothers or the intrigues of Bishop Romagère, in the case of the Daughters of Providence).

➔ The profound wisdom of Jean-Marie allowed him little by little to see history not as a series of unconnected facts or opaque realities. He learned to move forward in life with eyes wide open and with a watchful heart to discover in the events and in the relations with people the friendly life of the One who shows pathways which, freely and happily, can be followed. At the death of Bishop Caffarelli, he was the Vicar of St. Brieuc, and when it came to think of a new Bishop, he kept waiting, knowing that God would decide his future.

I do not know whether I shall have the courage (it is lacking) to attach myself to any (of the Bishops that will be nominated). 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. Administration bores me, tires me and bothers me; it is like being condemned to penal servitude. Moreover I have not taken any resolution. The good God will decide on my future; he is the Master.*⁵⁹

(Now the events led him to occupy himself with his life of administration)

➔ To discover God's Voice through human voices and faces that demands and reclaims, solicits and, requests. In the words of the Bishop and in the needs of the diocese, to hear another word and other assignments.

*I have always had the intention of contributing to the establishment of a Congregation like this one. More than ten years ago, I had thought of what it would be like and the rules it should have in order to grow strong and be eminently useful to the Church, but I never thought of belonging to it. Tired of administration and of business, I was not longing for a complete rest, for a priest must not enjoy such rest except in eternity. Nevertheless I would have liked to limit myself to the care of the establishments that I had already founded, without taking on others of a different kind. I thought I had done enough. If then, I tell you that I devote myself to this work, it is solely because I recognised in the voice of my saintly friend, of our worthy Bishop, the voice of God.*⁶⁰

➔ There are times where there are major cross-roads. Jean-Marie had only thought of the Brothers for Brittany. After 18 years, there suddenly arose many different invitations manifesting unexpected needs. There are rumours that call for the renouncement of the expectations that filled my life to ever new projects ... Thus begins the missionary epic. The voice of God takes on profane accents. But in the secular milieux, to the peripheries of the world, also beats the heart of God.

⁵⁹ To Querret, September 1st, 1817.

⁶⁰ To the Priests of Saint-Méen, S ; VIII, P. 2434.

*Providence provides that it be the government itself, which, by all earthly motives, pushes us into a path of apostolate: is not this wonderful? What a beautiful mission to accomplish!*⁶¹

Discernment takes place in a climate and context of personal relationships, of love of and for God, of love of those around us. It is more of a personal relationship than of a rational reflection, it is not a 'mental' exercise but rather an existential way. It is therefore not a call to a group of elite or handpicked Christians, but an exigency for those who want to become true Christians, disciples of Jesus and cooperators of God's project in a world that is as complex as ours.

⁶¹ To Rohrbacher, January 22, 1837.

6. DAILY EXERCICES TO KEEP US IN CONTINUAL DISCERNMENT

The title of this final paragraph has a vague resonance of publicity. It makes one think of elementary physical exercises to maintain the bodily form and vigour. It evokes the basic strategies that a "*personal trainer*". could teach

What are the strategies, the "gymnastics" that can allow us to maintain our attention with vigour, to keep our lucidity in form? Four movements are on the programme; movements that, worked day after day, will render us agile in discernment and will make no further effort but our usual way of being Christians.

"Examination":

To stop everyday and ask myself about what I receive, what happens, what I give ... To take a moment and sit on the balcony that overlooks the square of my life to capture what happens there: not to be satisfied with furtive and sporadic glances as through a window. It is not an exercise of mathematics or accountancy, but an exercise of interior calmness and sensibility. This simple exercise gives us an incredible agility when it is done every day, and, in addition, has significant therapeutic effects: it refreshes the memory. We are invited to discover that even in gray or black days, we receive it and that even in the days that seem "glorious" we have reasons to ask for forgiveness.

"Contemplation":

No need to fear at the beginning, because the exercise is easier than it seems to be; it is not reserved to champions of spiritual athletics. It is true, it has an exigency that often costs us: decentring ourselves. Putting the Other (and the others) before us and simply know, and see: to interest oneself be in details, guess the sentiments that the gestures manifest, relish the words, and appreciate the nuances ... In contemplation, we internalise the Word and its accents are concretised. In contemplation, our sensibility is transformed to the extent of making ours His tastes, His sentiments, His preferences, His ways of being ...

"Listening":

From the start of the game, it appears to be a simple exercise. Yet it is not as easy as it looks. Listening implies a readiness to receive, patience to accept the pace of the other, the ability to support the unexpected and the unforeseen, the intelligence to capture the unspoken, the elegance to value a poorly wrapped content and without introduction... Listening is not hearing myself in the other, or choosing what suits me or using the words of another as material of a preconceived response. Listening urges us from within, hooks us, because we perceive what we are told and a lot more.

"Exposing self":

Deciding to "go forth", according to Pope Francis invitation to the whole Church, to feel that something is "missing" in our life. Venturing into the peripheries, going out into the streets without a protective gear or umbrella, or on approaching a scene of accident. Going into the

neighborhood to experience another environment, or other preoccupations. Leaving your car or motorcycle from time to time and taking a bus or a tramway. Or just walk on foot. In fact, the routine stupefies us, rusts our narrow interior, and keeps us stuck into the pits where we settled ourselves

Discerning, seeking for the will of God every day of our life basically consists in an inner exercise: examining, contemplating, listening and taking the risk. All this makes us "attentive" and in the increasing "attention" our love of the Lord becomes more delicate, our following of Jesus more assiduous and our service to others more disinterested. Searching for delicacy in love, closeness in the following of Jesus, disinterestedness in the service of to others: this, and nothing else, is "searching for the will of God."

The searcher for the will of God is someone who sees himself and feels as being
a fruit of Love,
the object of being sent,
co-participant in a Dream,
and whose main commitment consists in the most complete and absolute faithfulness to this Love, to this Sending and to this Dream.

He who says from the bottom of his heart:

“ The rule of my thoughts and conduct is therefore to want what God wills, as he wills it and when he wills it.”

Table of contents

Introduction	5
1. FIRST PIECE OF ADVICE TO SAILORS	8
2- GOD’S PROJECT.....	13
2.1. Vocabulary for another language	14
2.2. Love project	15
2.3. The project that requires clarity	16
2.4. The breath of Love of an invading gentleness	20
3. THE DAILY PATH OF DISCERNMENT	25
4- MAY YOUR WILL BE DONE	34
4.1. Word of the new creation	35
4.2. Words born from the joy of being Son.....	37
4.3. Passing from «accomplishment» to «adherence»	39
5. LETTING GOD SEARCH FOR US	44
5.1. In community	45
➤ The ecclesial aspect:.....	45
➤ Accompanied discernment	47
➤ Community discernment.....	48
5.2. On listening to the Word	53
5.3. Reading the signs of the times	55
6. DAILY EXERCICES TO KEEP US IN CONTINUAL DISCERNMENT.....	59
"Examination":.....	59
"Contemplation":	60
"Listening":	60
"Exposing self":	60

