



# IF I DO NOT HAVE LOVE ... (1 Co 13, 1)

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**BROTHERS OF CHRISTIAN INSTRUCTION**

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## INTRODUCTION

*“See how they love one another!... See how they are willing to die for each other!...”*<sup>1</sup> said, admiringly, the pagan persecutors of the first Christians of Africa.

Giving one’s life for a just cause is an act of supreme witness, indeed. Here, what is most amazing, is the depth of the brotherhood that characterised the lives of these men and women, disciples of Christ. Where did this love, which bound them together so intensely, come from?

Today, young people and adults are moved by the witness of those who commit themselves radically to the service of the

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<sup>1</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, XXXIX, 7, quoted by Daniel Dideberg, s.j. in *La Vie spirituelle*, n° 772

poorest. The example of Mother Teresa is still very eloquent. Giving one's life for the love of one's neighbour, albeit through the total offering of one's life in humility and selfless service, is what arouses admiration.

And yet, "*our contemporaries find it difficult to figure out the unity of the twofold commandment of love, love of God and love of one's brother, and its source, the mystery of God who is love*", writes Daniel Dideberg<sup>2</sup>. They are moved by self-giving for others, but they do not see how love for one's brother can go with, and be motivated by, love of God.

Can this not be illustrated by the results of the survey carried out by the Congregation, a few months back, among lay persons who share our educational mission? They were asked the following question: "Which aspect of a Brother's life proclaims the Gospel?" The answer which received the most votes was the following: "Commitment in the service of youth." One cannot but rejoice at this answer. It is, indeed, through the loving service of youth that Brothers wish to express their love of God. Nevertheless, we may wonder about the meaning which this educational service holds in the mind of observers when we realise that the answers which concern a Brother's consecration, his prayer life, his vows, come last, with a very limited number of answers.

We cannot, however, draw hasty conclusions from these answers which must be interpreted in the context of the survey as a whole. For what concerns us here, these answers may reflect a misconception of what motivates a Brother in the exercise of his mission. Love of God and love of neighbour seem to have been considered separately here, both of which are manifestations of the same love which should animate a Brother. This circular seeks

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<sup>2</sup> In La Vie spirituelle, n° 772, '*Celui qui aime son frère aime Dieu*'.

to understand how fraternal life, in fact, does combine both aspects of the commandment of love.

In our attempts to live more and more in conformity with Christ at the service of the Kingdom, we know that we are not merely efficient servants carrying out our mission; we are disciples of Christ who have been convened by him and sent in his name for the service of children and of youth. Jesus' call makes us Brothers. This is the very foundation of our existence, as the Church reminds us: "*One of the tasks of consecrated life today is that of spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life...*"<sup>3</sup>

We shall, first of all, gaze upon Jesus, Son of the Father, Brother of a multitude of brothers. He whose love gives life teaches us how to love in truth. That love evangelises and heals.

His example will help us recognise him in our brother and patiently build a community founded on his presence.

Called and sent by the Lord, we shall then see how to place the resources of that fraternity at the service of the mission, at the service of youth.

Committed to consecrated life, we shall finally see how the vow of chastity incites us to greater love and makes us brothers to all, in the likeness of Christ, sacraments of his presence in the world.

With the help of Mary, we shall be in a position to better understand, such is my wish, that to be a Brother is an outstanding blessing, both for ourselves and for the world.

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<sup>3</sup> *Starting Afresh from Christ*, n° 28



# I

## JESUS, MASTER OF CHARITY

### *1) A LOVE NAMED JESUS*

“What does it mean to love?” The pages of our periodicals, our television and computer screens are full of that quest for love. Many seek happiness in experiences that are deeply unsatisfying. This misapprehension generates a deep frustration, the feeling of unattainable sought-after joy and, in the last analysis, the fear that life is not worth living.

Why do so many young people today, while they seem to have everything to be happy, collapse all of a sudden? What is the meaning of this ultimate cry of despair which consists in putting an end to one’s life? In fact, in their quest for happiness, men often find themselves locked in self-made prisons. They come up against the unconscious wish to possess for themselves and, in so

doing, remain on the threshold of love. They receive life from a God of love and they know him not! They are called to be in his image and they know it not! Who will tell them?

*“An intoxicated and undisciplined eros, then, is not an ascent in ‘ecstasy’ towards the Divine, but a fall, a degradation of man.”<sup>4</sup>* True love, on the contrary, is a discovery of the other, a selfless quest for the welfare of the other. This love is ecstasy because it is *“an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving”<sup>5</sup>*.

During his life on earth, the Lord has shown us the way to true love. We could reread a number of Gospel passages that speak so wonderfully of the love of the Son for the Father, and of the mercy of God for men.

*“What has Jesus truly brought us... What has he brought? The answer is simple: God. He has brought God and with him the only truth about our origin and destiny... Only the hardness of our heart makes us think that this isn’t much.”<sup>6</sup>*

What do we discover when reading the Gospel? Page after page, we enter into a permanent dialogue between Jesus and his Father, a colloquy in which Jesus invites his disciples to enter.

The very deeds of Jesus speak of the Father. As early as 12, Jesus wishes to be engaged in his Father’s affairs. He so signifies his intentions by taking his distances vis-à-vis Mary and Joseph: mystery of a unique and unfathomable relationship with the Father! Later on, at the Jordan River, a voice confirms what all are made aware of afterwards: *“You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased”* (Mark 1, 11). On another day, upon entering the Temple with his disciples, he is deeply distressed

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, n° 4

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, n° 6

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 64

when he sees how the house of his Father has become a “*den of thieves*” (Mark 11, 17) and he violently drives out the peddlers.

The very word which Jesus uses to speak with his Father alone reveals the secret of his relationship with God: “Abba”! This word which a small child uses with his father and which no Jew would have dared pronounce when addressing himself to God, shows a filial relationship so intense, the depth of which cannot be fathomed, that we are forever surprised when we ourselves pronounce it.

The relationship of Jesus with his Father is so strong that the disciples, amazed, ask him to teach them to pray as he does. Indeed, they constantly see him concerned with doing the will of the Father and whenever he can, he seeks the intimacy of his presence. “*But the news about Him was spreading even farther, and large crowds were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray*” (Luke 5, 15-16).

For Jesus, the Sabbath is the day of salvation, the day of benefits granted by his Father, the day par excellence on which the Father restores, heals, saves. One day, Jesus says with authority: “*And this woman, a daughter of Abraham as she is, whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, should she not have been released from this bond on the Sabbath day?*” (Luke 13, 16).

Jesus shows us the Father as a merciful father. Luke’s Gospel gives the best illustration of this through the “parables of mercy”, especially that of the lost son. The Father runs towards his son who returns after a long absence: “*His father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him*” (Luke 15, 20). The Father, filled with joy, welcomes back the son who was lost. He cannot understand the bitterness of the older son who has all of his father’s possessions at his disposal.

The whole Gospel testifies to the Love that unites the Father to the Son, in the Spirit. In reality, while showing us the Father, Jesus also speaks about himself. “*Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me?*” (John 14, 10). The love that is in the Father is in Jesus. The parables of the Father’s mercy in Luke come immediately upon the Pharisees “*murmuring*”: “*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*” (Luke 15, 2). Since he himself is challenged – he is accused of showing too much kindness – he speaks of his Father. But he also speaks about himself. He thus makes known who he is.

In the last analysis, to the question asked by the scribe : “*Master, what must I do to have eternal life?*” – a question which really asks what we must do to be happy –, Jesus answers: “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself*” (Luke 10, 27).

“*God, Who has a fatherly concern for everyone, has willed that all men should constitute one family and treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood. For having been created in the image of God..., all men are called to one and the same goal, namely God Himself. ... For this reason, love for God and neighbour is the first and greatest commandment. ... Love therefore is the fulfillment of the Law*” (Romans 13, 9-10; cf. 1 John 4, 20).<sup>7</sup>

The love of the Father and of the Son is communicated to us in the Spirit. Through baptism, to love as Jesus does is the fundamental vocation of every person. Loved by God, we are called upon to love him in return, and to love as he loves. Our vocation through baptism, and also through our consecration,

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<sup>7</sup> Vatican Council II, GS 24

consists in being more and more “son” of the Father and “brother” to all men our brothers, with a preference for the little ones.

This meets up with this other word of Jesus which so moved the heart of our founder: “*So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish*” (Matthew 18, 14). Allowing these words of Jesus to penetrate to the very core of our being brings us nearer to the burning heart of the Father whose love, day after day, must consume our own.

## **2) *WHAT IS MY LOVE FOR THE LORD LIKE?***

*“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”* (Jn 21, 16).

Why does Jesus ask that question? Shortly before, upon hearing the disciple that Jesus loved say “It is the Lord”, Peter, without waiting, jumped into the water to join Jesus. Peter loves Jesus. But the Lord’s question reaches beyond that particular event. To the disciple who denied him and to whom he will entrust his flock, Jesus asks the fundamental question: Are you willing to entrust your life to me and me alone?

To each of us, the Lord asks that question: “In spite of your frailty and of you sin, will you love me as I love you, the way I love every person? Will you enter the dynamics of love which I enjoy with the Father?”

This call to love Jesus and to love as he does is at the very core of our existence and of the vocation of every baptised person. It is a question of loving Jesus and of loving our brother and our sister as he does. To love Jesus, the Son of the Father, and to love the person who is near me is one and the same. We cannot love the Lord and not love the one who is his image nearest to us.

“...The Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, ‘that all may be one...as we are one’ (John 17, 21-22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”<sup>8</sup>

We must listen to that call: “Do you love me?” This call comes from afar, from Him who is All Other, but at the same time from very close by, from the Spirit whose temple we are. He also asks us the same question in the brother who knocks at our door. We must listen to that call and, like Peter, reply: “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” We must feel that our answer pledges the whole of our being. Everything in us becomes meaningful through the Love that is God. We are created in his image.

This is not a question of feeling. Feelings are not absent from human experience but that to which we are called goes way beyond what a person may feel. The Pope underscores this in his encyclical: “A sentiment can be a marvellous first spark, but it is not the fullness of love.”<sup>9</sup> Basically, it is a matter of a disciple’s authentic commitment in his following of Jesus, the love of a disciple who follows the Master until he loves as He loves: “His death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form.”<sup>10</sup>

It is “a freely-bestowed experience of love from within, a love which by its very nature must then be shared with others. Love grows through love. Love is ‘divine’ because it comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes

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<sup>8</sup> GS 24

<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, n° 17

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* n° 12

*us a 'we' which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is 'all in all' (1 Corinthians 15, 28).<sup>11</sup>*

“*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*” Another question overlaps that question: Simon, do you love as I love, with a love that evangelises, with a love that heals? This is why, to Peter’s reply, Jesus adds: “*Tend my sheep*”... then: “*Follow me*” (John 21, 17.19).

### **3) A LOVE THAT EVANGELISES**

The main objective of our educational endeavours is “to make Jesus Christ known” by evangelising souls, hearts and minds through furthering the building up of a society of persons transfigured by the grace of God. Our specific mission is to love that world called by God to a radical transformation, to love it even to the very gift of own life so that it may fulfil its vocation. That mission is carried out through the education of children and of youth.

Where we are concerned, to love our Brothers, young people, the world, is to offer what is most precious to us and which we have received from the Church: God himself! God – Love! How then can we witness to that Love with people who seem to live without feeling the need to know Him? In short, how can we proclaim the Good News today?

In spite of difficulties encountered on the way, a number of meaningful experiences attest that young people are more than happy to be introduced to Jesus by educators who are convinced of the importance of their mission. Here is, among other

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. n° 18

testimonies, what a Brother has experienced in one of our schools. Having mobilised young adults, several of whom are past students, his main objective is to give students the opportunity to live charity in deed, among themselves at first, then towards people in need. Thus, young people learn to grow in respect for one another, in mutual support, in attention to those who go through a rough patch. An undercurrent of charity is established upon which lives are built and shot through with the saving Word of God. Miracles take place, in secret. In a world in which God is all too often absent, young people are gratified as their faith blossoms.

We are not alone in testifying that the Gospel is Love. That Brother has given rise, between young people and adults, to an undercurrent of fraternal love which has become the basis for the proclamation of the Good News of salvation.

*“If we wish to give catechesis its missionary dynamism, we must place it at the very heart of the ecclesial community.”*<sup>12</sup> This declaration echoes what John Paul II wrote at the beginning of the new millennium: *“To make the Church the home and the school of communion: that is the great challenge facing us ... if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings.”*<sup>13</sup> A community where fraternal relations and prayer are a priority is a community which proclaims the Good News.

Another example is this youth who, cycling in front of a church in which the Eucharist was being celebrated, stopped and sat in silence at the back of the church. Not a believer himself, he was struck by the prayerful community which radiated an atmosphere of brotherhood. He was enthralled. He returned

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<sup>12</sup> Text for the orientation of catechesis in France, Fleurus-Mame, 2006

<sup>13</sup> John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, n° 43

several times. He is currently a priest. “*The Church exists in order to evangelize.*”<sup>14</sup>

We might become more conscious of the power of love to open hearts to the Gospel when open proclamation of the message is more difficult as is the case in countries with a strong Muslim presence where our Brothers work. “*In certain countries, the witness of brotherly love opens doors which would otherwise remain closed. The love of Christ will save the world and the works of mercy testify eloquently to this.*”<sup>15</sup>

If we open our doors, if we live as brothers united by Christ in love, conversions will take place and the grace of God will move young people enticed by Love. A community which truly seeks to practise respect for and trust in one another, shared joy and mutual support, makes the Invisible visible. Its openness mirrors the kindness of God for the outsider. Its fraternal love embodies Christ to the seekers of God.

Brothers who are united as a community can live that experience. That experience is strongest when they risk opening their doors to lay persons who wish to partake of that same fraternal love rooted in the Mennaisian charism. True love, lived in the name of the Lord and respectful of everyone’s grace and vocation, evangelises and kindles apostolic zeal.

#### **4) A LOVE THAT HEALS**

One day, Jesus was accompanied by his disciples and a large crowd when he met a mother whose only son was being

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<sup>14</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n° 14

<sup>15</sup> Luis Montes, Provincial of the Institute of the Word Incarnate in the Middle East.

carried to his burial. “*He felt compassion for her, and said to her, ‘Do not weep’*” (Luke 7, 13). He came up and touched the coffin: “*Young man, I say to you, arise!*” (Luke 7, 14)

This event precedes his meeting with John’s disciples during which he introduces himself as follows: “*The blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the Gospel preached to them*” (Luke 7, 22).

God’s mercy looks with kindness upon the poor, it gives life and heals. Evangelising is an act of love which saves man and frees him from the evil that eats away at him. It re-establishes him thoroughly in his full vocation as child of God.

If we love, our efforts at spreading the Good News will produce fruits of salvation. We shall not very often see them, possibly never – luckily for our humility! On the other hand, if our heart has not been transformed by the love of God, we shall forever remain lukewarm and unsatisfied disciples. No matter how committed we are to countless endeavours and how much we wear ourselves out in carrying out numerous projects, if there is no love, our efforts will not produce the expected results.

Our educational endeavours heal and save if they are accomplished in love. Whoever is not carried away by feelings of jealousy, of anger, of bitterness, and who seeks to imitate the patience and the meekness of the Lord, is an educator after the heart of John Mary de la Mennais and Gabriel Deshayes.

One day, a young man came to participate in a meeting organised by a group of lay persons and Brothers. He came with his ‘girlfriend’ and he was clothed in an aggressive manner which clearly bespoke his personal feelings. One had every right to wonder what these two young people were looking for at a meeting the main objective of which was to feel loved. Well, and rightly so, both needed being recognised and loved. From the

second day, the young man had changed clothes and sported an open countenance. Something had changed in him simply because people had had faith in him. He had felt loved and respected as he was and had heard no untoward remarks concerning his attitude and accoutrement. Having put aside his resolutely provocative airs, he allowed himself to be “righted” by love, the love of the Lord which the animators of the meeting had so strongly wished to communicate.

Unconditional respect for persons brings down barriers. On the contrary, believing others incapable of change pins people down as doomed to failure and closes access to hope. True educators seek to give rise to love of self in young people: *“They think I’m good, so there must be some good in me, therefore I can be altogether good.”*

John Mary de la Mennais would tell his Brothers: *“With children [... these infirm children to whom you will give health to their souls – he would say in some other circumstance], be kind, patient, gentle; without any doubt, one must also be firm, but without harshness and without giving in to impatience. You will redress the failings of these poor children much more by being loved than by being feared by them.”*<sup>16</sup>

*“Affection must be visible so that it can give rise to trust, Don Bosco would say. Whoever wishes to win over the trust of someone must appeal to his heart. A teacher who is content with giving lessons in class is a schoolteacher and nothing more. However, if he spends his free time with young people, he then becomes like a brother to them.”*

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<sup>16</sup> A travers la Correspondance VI, 22



## II

### FRATERNAL LIFE

*“Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practise the spirituality of communion as witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God's design.”<sup>17</sup>*

Brothers are granted the grace to live in their community what the Church as a whole is called upon to manifest to the world. They form a community of disciples of Jesus where their life of communion reflects the trinitarian communion. They experience love as a gift received from God and as a service to one's brother. Each one, in his attempt to imitate Christ, seeks the happiness of others. In the community, the will of God is discerned in the Spirit and, in the community, one can verify that kindness triumphs over hate.

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<sup>17</sup> Vita Consecrata, n° 46

In such a community, Brothers discover the grace of being brothers to each other, signs of the Kingdom which is coming in the person of Jesus.

### 1) *THE COMMUNITY AS MIRROR OF GOD-TRINITY*

*“Let us love one another so that, in the same spirit, we may confess the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,”* sings the Byzantine liturgy. Saint Augustine puts it this way: *“You see Charity, you see the Trinity.”* Echoing these words, Benedict XVI shows how the Spirit gushes forth from the pierced heart of Jesus to flood transformed disciples with trinitarian Love: *“By dying on the Cross... Jesus ‘gave up his Spirit’ (John 19:30), anticipating the gift of the Holy Spirit that he would make after his Resurrection. This was to fulfil the promise of ‘rivers of living water’ that would flow out of the hearts of believers, through the outpouring of the Spirit. The Spirit, in fact, is that interior power which harmonizes their hearts with Christ’s heart and moves them to love their brethren as Christ loved them, when he bent down to wash the feet of the disciples and above all when he gave his life for us.”*<sup>18</sup>

Contemplating the mystery of the Spirit’s sanctifying presence and of his effusion on the Brothers gathered in the name of Jesus promotes the growth of the grace of unity. We then become more and more the image, albeit quite imperfect, of the One whom we proclaim. Whoever does not turn his gaze on the transfixed Christ upon the cross cannot drink from love’s living spring of Water which will lead him to care for his brother in a humble and joyful service. When John Mary de la Mennais asked

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<sup>18</sup> Cf Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, n° 19

his Brothers to gaze upon their crucifix, he was referring to that gaze which opens itself up to the love of Christ.

It is through the vigour of a heart “filled with Holy Spirit and wisdom” that we can build a true community, sign of the Kingdom to come. But where can we drink from that Source of the Spirit and of wisdom? At the Eucharistic table! “*Body, communion: the same words designate both the Eucharist and the community, and the whole Church.*”<sup>19</sup> “*Gathered in the name of the Lord, religious communities find their natural centres in the Eucharist. It is then natural that they be visibly gathered around the tabernacle in which the presence of the Blessed Sacrament expresses and accomplishes that which must be the main mission of every religious family.*”<sup>20</sup>

It is not optional for a community of Brothers to have an oratory where the “real Presence” of the Lord makes itself at hand to our adoration and imitation. It is of vital importance! The mystery of Jesus, who died and rose from the dead, gives meaning to our life. He holds us together as a community. We therefore cannot disregard having him by our side in the sacrament of Love laid down for us. In some of our communities, the absence of that “Sign” should be felt as a void. Let us not be like the disciple at Bethany (cf Matthew 26, 6-13) who, upon seeing the very precious perfume a woman poured over the feet of Jesus, exclaimed, scandalised: “*Why this waste?*” Our communities should follow that woman’s example. So that we may be the “*fragrance of Christ*” and “*manifest the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place*” (2 Corinthians 2, 14-15), should we not, in front of the Sacrament of his presence, spend, “waste” time which seems so precious from a human standpoint

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<sup>19</sup> Daniel-Ange, *L’amour fraternel qui donne d’exister*, Béatitudes, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, March 7, 1980, to religious.

and which we would very much like to use differently? *“For, in fact, you always have the poor with you”* (Matthew 26, 11).

The Church asks us to celebrate the Eucharist on a regular basis in the community oratory. Indeed, she knows that without the grace of that sacrament celebrated together, we would not know how to put on the apron of service to rush to the help of our brothers. She also knows that the spirit of individualism grows unfettered wherever the Source of unity is absent. Daily Eucharist is, for each Brother, essential nourishment on the road of life and the ferment of unity for each community. It is a privation not to be able to partake daily of the Eucharistic sacrifice.<sup>21</sup> We should be consumed by the desire to be nourished daily by the Body given up for us and the Blood shed for us. In the words of the Eucharistic prayer, it is when *“we are nourished by his body and his blood and filled with the Spirit”* that we will be *“one body and one spirit in Christ”*.

## 2) *THE COMMUNITY, PLACE OF ENCOUNTER WITH GOD*

*“Throughout the history of the Church, consecrated life has been a lively presence of that action of the Spirit, a privileged space of love of God and of neighbour witnessing to the divine project of building up the whole of humanity, through a civilisation of love, into a large family of children of God.”*<sup>22</sup>

At the heart of a life entirely consecrated to God can be found, joined together, the two facets of the same commandment. We do not wish to be among those who, after having vowed themselves to God in community, divulge to the world their inability to share and to forgive on a daily basis. On then contrary,

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<sup>21</sup> Cf Rule of Life, C 43.

<sup>22</sup> Synod of Bishops, *Final message of the IXth assembly*, 1994.

we wish to be icons of the splendour of the trinitarian Love that attends to the neighbour and humbly serves him. We know that to love God and to love our brothers are expressions of the same love. “In God, see your brother. In your brother, see God.” To disregard one of those two expressions would blind others to the meaning of our life.

The community is “*the workshop where I practise, humbly and concretely, my love for the Lord*”.<sup>23</sup> The manager of the workshop is God. The fraternal community is in the image of the three men who paid a visit to Abraham and who, when they departed, left behind a message of hope, the good news of the birth of the child of the Promise, pledge of unity and of fecundity for the people of the Alliance. As image of the Trinity, the community will be all the more fecund and missionary as its members take greater care in building the community on humble charity, daily.

In this community, the time given to prayer and the time spent in the loving service of our brother and of the mission are not in competition. To see God in our brother requires recognising in him our elder brother, Jesus, listening to him, seeing him and loving him. The saints, and above all Mary, our models in the faith, speak eloquently of the way in which we can “set aside God to be with God” according to John Mary de la Mennais’ expression. They invite us to unity of life in the dynamics of the same love that leads us to God and to our brothers.

### **3) THE COMMUNITY FOUNDED ON TRUST**

In practice, however, the community does not always appear so radiant. Daily monotony, diverse conflicts, personal problems this one or that one may have, can darken the horizon, at

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<sup>23</sup> Daniel Ange, *L’amour fraternel qui donne d’exister*, Béatitudes, p. 17.

times for days on end, and lead us to the loss of meaningful community living. One then risks seeking refuge or diversion in activism.

Such circumstances are by no means rare, and all communities are confronted to them in one way or another. Besides, it is our ability to face this kind of situation peacefully which will testify to the maturity and the solidity of our vocation. Nevertheless, temporary disagreements may grow more important, making painful everyday living for all, weakening gospel witnessing by Brothers who then run the risk of seeking elsewhere what they do not find in the community.

In fact, a true community cannot be built up without mutual trust. *“Nothing destabilises, undermines and breaks down the community like doubt, questioning and suspicion about oneself and others.”*<sup>24</sup> To trust one’s Brother reinforces fraternal bonds and strengthens that Brother. He will then be more positive about himself and will not seek self-esteem through taking the shine off others. Trust promotes hope. Without trust, aggressiveness, bitterness and selfishness thrive.

Let’s admit it, we all too often prefer doing things by ourselves, either through reluctance to ask for help or because we do not trust the end product. In the long run, this kind of behaviour undermines mutual esteem and estranges people from each other. To ask for help, on the other hand, is like saying: “I count on you!” “I need you!” “I trust you!”

It has been said that fraternal life in community is something of a miracle. It most certainly is. It is up to each of us, however, to contribute our share for this grace to materialise. To that end, one should not give in to fear. Fear or worry can lead to mistrust of self and of others. Such a frame of mind induces paralysis and shuts up the heart. It is sometimes said that such and

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 272.

such a Brother should know what we have against him and that there are limits to trust at first sight. We believe that to tell the other clearly what we think of him is a guarantee of truth. We claim that the Brother whose behaviour irritates us should know about it. Let's not be so hasty: our seemingly good intentions are all too often a cover up for our failures to manage our own fears and prevent us from opening up to others, excusing and enduring everything as Saint Paul urges us to do (Cf 1 Corinthians 13, 7).

What transformation takes place, on the other hand, in the Brother whom we decide to trust! A wholesome mutual comprehension sets in between us when we stop suspecting or imagining things that never were or when we cease mistakenly interpreting words and deeds! Trusting is "contagious"! We then become aware that difficulties fade, that life is simpler and that faces light up.

*"For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'"* (Romans 8, 15). He pours his love in us. *"Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 2, 4-5).

In the words of John Mary de la Mennais, *"Let each one rejoice at the joy of others, suffer at their pains..."*<sup>25</sup>. When trust binds the body of the community, everyone's charism is a source of joy for all and creates unity.

#### 4) THE COMMUNITY, SCHOOL OF DISCERNMENT

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<sup>25</sup> Rule of 1835.

*“Communities of active life should consider whether they haven’t gradually become task forces rather than spiritual driving forces.”*<sup>26</sup> To discern personally, and then as a community what the Lord is telling us, is a unique and precious grace on which the apostolic impact of our communities, to a large extent, depends.

*“Bless and do not curse”* (Romans 12, 14). Such is the language of the Spirit. Speaking the words of the Spirit, doing what they tell us, enables us to see what the Spirit sees. And when our eyes see the light, the whole person radiates. Whoever speaks of wonderful things, sees what is wonderful. *“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good ... so that it will give grace to those who hear”* (Ephesians 4, 29). Communities that are incapable of seeing and underscoring what is wonderful and good in a confrere’s apostolate are communities which have lost the ability to discern the Spirit. The passion for evangelisation has died out.

Our capacity to see needs to be “transfigured”. How often do we not allow ourselves to be deceived by what we see, while paying no attention to what we do not see, without even attempting to grasp what transpires from deep within. *“When the devil tries to put before the eyes of my soul the shortcomings of this or that Sister who is not so friendly, I hasten to seek out her virtues.”*<sup>27</sup> Our words often betray our failure to see properly. Our ears are not trained to hear what may be difficult to put into words. We have to develop something of an internal reflex which enables us to listen to and see the hidden side of the Brother who lives with us. *“And this I pray, says Saint Paul to the Philippians, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent...”* (Philippians 1, 9-10).

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<sup>26</sup> Luc Van Looy, *Communiquer l’esprit, transmettre la spiritualité et y former, une expérience communautaire*, SDB.

<sup>27</sup> Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus.

To love one's Brother, therefore, is to be open to the Spirit. One can neither hear nor discern the will of God without that keen and sharp insight which avoids being deceived by appearances, even at the risk of seeming naïve in the eyes of detractors. *"Someone told me in private that I am a good-natured dreamer, romantic and naïve rather than a true statesman. I may very well be a dreamer – especially if this word means that I wager primarily on people's qualities – ... but whoever is armed with such a weapon has no fear of the most modern machine gun."*<sup>28</sup>

There is nothing like the fraternal community to reveal to ourselves what we really are in truth. Similarly, there is nothing like it to improve our sensitivity to the Spirit who alone can transform the community into a truly missionary community.

What a treasure it is for our eyes to open themselves to what is wonderful, and cause gifts and charisms to blossom, and doors and windows to open up to the light of grace! Such a manner of seeing gives rise to humility, increases charity, builds up unity, liberates new energies of self-giving to others and allows us to hear what the Spirit within has to say.

## **5) BUILDING UP THE COMMUNITY – AN EVERYDAY ENDEAVOUR**

We cannot love God if we do not love our brothers. What is more, we love God only when we acknowledge and love him in the little ones. We love the poor only when we recognise the Lord in the nearest of our Brothers. We respect and love God in the same manner we respect and love our Brother.

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<sup>28</sup> Vaclav Havel.

Such a task is a never ending struggle and victory is at the price of one's life. This is what Jesus taught us. If we do not even recognise him when he asks for a drink of water, shall we allow him to open our eyes to see and our hands to share?

He calls upon us to give up our life, day after day, by letting charity take over the smallest things in our life, without muttering, each in his own way and according to his personal gifts. So that our community may be "*the home and the school of communion*"<sup>29</sup>, he invites us to unceasing daily commitment to self-renewal through attitudes such as these:

- Attempt to remain even-tempered if, by nature, we are inclined to react violently to such and such an attitude or word from a Brother. Try to remain peaceful, avoiding tensions, knowing full well that we'll have to exercise self-control again and again.

- "Speak pleasant and constructive words", and avoid stooping to severe condemnations, at the risk of believing ourselves superior and flawless.

- Show openness to the poor outside the community but, before all else, be attentive to all in the community, which presupposes a heart that discerns and sees people's needs.

- Learn to serve without imposing ourselves, go out of our way without seeming indispensable, speak without monopolising conversation, encourage expression without indiscretion.

- Give rise to joy and humour. Fraternal moments when it feels good to be together are precious. Forgoing such moments, not giving them all the attention they call for, stems from individualism.

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<sup>29</sup> *Novo Millenio ineunte*, n° 43

- Pray daily for our Brothers, keep them in our silent prayer. Before making a difficult move with one or the other, pray for him in the stillness of our heart. Before asking for forgiveness from a confrere, gaze upon the crucified Christ and present him our confrere, listening to the voice of the Lord who is “*mEEK and humble of heart*” (Matthew 11, 29).

One could go on. It is up to each one of us to wonder what course to keep and listen to the subtle breath of the Spirit. The Lord invites us to travel daily the heroic pathways of charity. In the words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta: “*I never nurse a crowd, always a person.*”

We are familiar with the advice given by John Mary de la Mennais to Miss Jallobert: “*Kindness presupposes annihilation of self-love... If you still hold on to something, you will not suffer gladly that it be taken away from you... Bitter words, ill-humoured remarks stem from the depths of an ailing heart in which feelings of happy compliance, acquiescence, simplicity and faith are absent... Whence, my daughter, this lack of kindness? Is it not because you do not serve God for Himself? ... The practice of patience seems relatively easy on special occasions, but not so in everyday situations... Let us strive to attain that joyful and peaceful state of kindness...*”<sup>30</sup>

He would tell the Brothers: “*Should there arise among them (the Brothers) some disagreement, however slight, they shall, without fail, reconcile themselves before evening prayer.*”<sup>31</sup> How often people keep turning over resentments, forever nursing unresolved conflicts and entertaining hidden rivalries that undermine the atmosphere of peace and of joy in our

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<sup>30</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, *An Anthology taken from his writings*, Marcel Doucet, p. 174.

<sup>31</sup> Rule of 1823.

communities! Rather than allow the freedom of forgiveness to take over, we let our idolised ego take the whole place.

Whoever is poor of heart is not shocked by the poverty of others. He is patient, he bears all things, endures all things... (Cf 1 Corinthians 13, 4ff). "*When two Brothers forgive each other in truth, they speak something of the joy of heaven.*"<sup>32</sup> Is this not a path to holiness, an internal strength "*which finds expression in the serene discretion of everyday service*"<sup>33</sup>? This struggle is not our own. It is the Lord's work. We shall never achieve true love without the Lord. We shall not love if, in each of us, Love is not made welcome in our everyday human reality.

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Houix, *La brisure du cœur*, in *Voie spirituelle*, DDB, p. 67.

<sup>33</sup> John Paul II in Lourdes, 2004.

### **III**

## **BROTHERS WHO ARE CONVENED AND SENT**

When calling to mind the mission of the Institute, it is important to remember the varied forms that that mission can take and to consider all the particular situations of its implementation in diverse countries and cultures, taking into account personal gifts, functions, age, etc... For example, here is a young Brother who lives in a community and carries on his studies while engaging in an educational endeavour, or a Brother who lives in a community of student-Brothers. How do they live that mission? What does that mission mean for the school director who is taken up from morn till night by the numerous responsibilities of his function, or for the teacher who is also involved in pastoral ministry and who is taken up all day long with class preparation or with his students? What does that mission mean for the older Brother who, having retired from full-time teaching, still

participates in pastoral animation and assumes an educational presence among children and young people or renders a number of services in various areas? What does that mission represent for the Brother who lives in a community without direct links with an educational undertaking but whose members make an effort to answer calls from the parish, the diocese or various associations? Or for the sick Brother who is bed-ridden and whose heart and life are offered to God in a love that is stronger than words can ever express?

One cannot possibly explore each situation in detail. We shall rather try to see what is common to all these Brothers who *“regardless of their age or health, share the common mission of the Congregation through their prayer, their work, their sufferings and their holiness”* (C48).

### **1) THE BROTHERS HAVE NOT CHOSEN EACH OTHER**

*“Although they have not chosen their confreres, they try to know and love them with the heart of Christ”* (C 37). This is a feature of religious communities. They consist of members who have been called to the same vocation without having chosen each other. Upon answering that call, they chose to become part of a family in which, if they understood its spirit – to some extent, at least –, they did not know its members. For it is Christ who has instituted that “family” and who makes up its unity. Just like the apostles who, so different from each other, became “travelling companions” of Christ, we too are convened by the Lord.

Without having chosen each other, our experience is that of a common indwelling Spirit who bolsters our unity. It may very well be that those who see us are more aware of this than we, ourselves, are. We are so much attuned to our shortcomings! One day, a woman religious who was sharing prayer life with a

community of Brothers, observed: “Above all, keep doing your morning meditation together. You can’t imagine the living power which this represents and the fraternal unity which transpires through it.” No, in fact, the Brothers could neither imagine and nor were they aware of this. And yet, their silent prayer witnessed to the fraternal bonds that they had forged, day after day.

It is all too obvious that we are men and that our characters are not always compatible. However, is this not the guarantee that fraternal love is not an empty word? As Brothers, we do not love our friends first, but those who are nearest to us, those whom the Lord has placed by our side and whom he has given us as Brothers. We do not dream of having at our disposal Brothers who would meet all of our expectations.

The establishment of such communities is entrusted to the enlightened consideration of the major superiors. It is one of their main tasks. “*He considers the judicious assignment of Brothers one of his most important duties*” (C 101). To accomplish that mission, they create the conditions for a true dialogue and rely on the generosity of their Brothers which then translates into a fraternal acceptance of the proposals made to them and a joyous assent to the mission entrusted to them. The immediate acceptance, without a murmur, of a change in mission or community always gives rise to great admiration. It is the clear sign that one neither chooses his Brothers nor his mission, but only “*Jesus and Jesus crucified*”.

## **2) THE BROTHERS ARE SENT**

Brothers are not owners of the mission that they receive, and neither are they of the charism. It is a gift granted by the Spirit for the evangelisation of children and young people.

As has been said above, a Brother who has retired from full-time teaching and who lives in a community without direct links with an educational undertaking, partakes of the mission of the Congregation as much, for example, as the Brother who has been asked to run a school: *“All the Brothers, through their belonging to the Congregation and by obedience, are fully committed to the mission. The modalities vary depending on the age, the possibilities and the circumstances of each.”*<sup>34</sup>

Let us repeat it: every mission is a mission that has been received. Every Brother’s mission is a participation in the mission of the Congregation. There is no such thing as a mission of lower importance. When the mission entrusted to us gives us greater responsibility, we know that it makes of us servants. We then receive it with humility and confidence. Through the superior, we recognise, in faith, what the Lord asks of us.

Who knows who is the most fecund in the eyes of God, whether it is the aged Brother who embraces his illness or infirmity with serenity, or the Brother who is totally devoted to children in the animation of his classroom or of a school, working with a team of Brothers and lay people at the implementation of an educational project? God’s concept of fecundity is not measured in terms of human productivity. What pleases God is doing what he asks of us without comparing ourselves to others. A community will be all the more united as each of its members welcomes each Brother’s presence in its midst as an expression of the will of God seen through the mandate given by the superior.

We do not ask to receive such and such a mission. We make ourselves available and we consider as best for us what is entrusted to us. A Brother does not wish to study in order to fulfil

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<sup>34</sup> General Chapter of 2006, *At the service of the shared Mission – Convictions*, p. 16.

a mission in particular. He would be much deceived at the end of his training if he received an obedience he never wished for. Happy is the Brother who makes himself available and who has not secretly murmured against his superior because the latter has entrusted to him a mission for which he has not prepared himself.

Of course, the superior should attempt to take into account the talents, qualities and charisms of each person when making choices. However, very many Brothers can reassure him from personal experience: true joy and lasting peace of heart can only be had when we surrender into the hands of God through humble and joyful obedience. Take, for instance, the case of that Brother who, having reached retirement age, received a letter from his Provincial sending him in an African country to set up a new foundation. His answer demonstrated his total availability: "I had not foreseen this. However, I have always until now said yes to what I have been asked to do. I am not about to change. I shall therefore go where you are sending me."

Happy the Brother who, without murmur or regret, has shown such availability! The joyful offering of one's life is rendered fruitful by the Lord.

### **3) *THE COMMUNITY, SENT ON A MISSION***

The Community is a unit of the Church which brings together Brothers who are called and sent forth. Every community, by vocation, carries out the mission of the Congregation. It must, on the other hand, become what it is, rendering fruitful the gift received. We must now see more concretely how to build up that community which has come together for the education and the evangelisation of children and of young people.

In order to do this, we must prove creative while maintaining a strong sense of the community. The Spirit's wish is for personal talents and charisms to become productive at the service of the community and of the mission. This requires setting up places where people can dialogue and share, but it also requires that hearts be prepared to engage in an authentic process of discernment.

### **1. The community project**

The community is brought together by Christ who blesses children and brings them salvation. For a start, that "mystery" is not the result of our individual efforts; it is the grace of the calling which each of us has answered. When the Apostle says: "*You are the Temple of the Spirit*", have we got something to do with it? No! It is a free gift from God's mercy. Nevertheless, we have to welcome it and open ourselves to its action. This is what we are doing when working out the community project.

In order to understand this even better, it may be good to reread the parable of the talents in its application to our community. If we took the time to see what talents have been received by each and everyone and how they can be placed at the service of one and all and of the mission entrusted to us, we would very much have progressed in the attainment of the community project.

Putting together a community project presupposes welcoming – each year in a new way – the gift received through the mission entrusted to us. This means: receiving together this mission, each with his specific role defined by the Provincial or the local superior, making our own the immediate living setting, the local Church, the environment in which the community finds itself, etc...

We must also make our own the Rule of Life and the orientations of the General and Provincial Chapters which define today's way of life in keeping with the Mennaisian charism, source of our unity and of our fecundity. We can then move on to its concrete implementation according to directives issued by the Provincial or Vice-Provincial.

It is fitting, at last, after the community has thus discerned the way in which to fulfil its mission, to seek confirmation from the major superior. This is an important stage. It allows confirmation in the Spirit that the course which has been undertaken is in accordance with the Lord's will and in fidelity to the charism of the Institute. No man is an island. Communion at the level of the Province and of the Institute depends very much on how this last stage is implemented, with trust and selflessness, indicating a willingness to revise such and such aspect of the community project.

Wherever lay persons are involved in a community process, this working out of the community project must extend beyond the Brothers' community. Even if it needs to have its own specific project, the community has to work it out in the context of sharing the Mennaisian charism with lay people. This is already taking place in some places. This requires an even greater degree of openness to the Spirit and a closer dialogue with the major superior. Truth and Charity go hand in hand when seeking to carry out the will of the Lord.

Of course, one would have to go into greater details when working out the different steps of the community project. This isn't the place to do it. It belongs to the major superiors and their council to give communities the elements they require to follow the necessary course of action.

It is important for the sectors of the Institute that are used to implement the community project to continue doing so in

response to the call of the Spirit. Those who find it difficult to follow this process must resolve to take the necessary means to the desired end. Here is a case where solidarity at the level of the Institute can be exercised, one sector helping another on the journey to greater fidelity to the calls of the Church and of the world.

## 2. Community discernment

As we have become aware, working out the community project implies a process of community discernment. It is appropriate, therefore, that we try to understand the process thoroughly. We know how difficult it is to carry out such discernment in our personal life. Carrying out such discernment in community involves the same requirements, but performed in heartfelt communion with others, unanimously seeking only God's will. It is by no means my intention here to provide a method of discernment but simply to underscore some aspects of that process.

The Rule of Life invites us to enter into this spiritual community process, a brief description of which can be found in the Directory: *“Together with his Brothers, the superior, keeping in mind differences in age, formation and mentality, tries to discern the will of God in persons and events. Together, the Brothers give priority to the common good, they adjust individual opinions in the light of other people's views, study situations, and devise responses suited to the needs of the Church and of the world. Thus, religious obedience and fraternal understanding reinforce each other.”*<sup>35</sup>

In reality, such a process presupposes, first and foremost, a common will to collectively live the charism that has been received and to be responsive to the calls that have been

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<sup>35</sup> Rule of Life, D 60.

experienced after their authenticity has been verified. That process also requires the ability to share at that level among Brothers so that our personal impressions may be validated, and at times rectified, by those of others, each one trying to listen to the Spirit rather than to what might be the product of his imagination. Discernment presupposes the necessary humility and sense of community to accept that one's positions can be challenged.

It is only as the community grows in charity that the communion which is crucial to such an enterprise can intensify. Gradually, Brothers, under the impetus and the responsibility of the superior, must be able to place their personal liberty at the service of the group in such a way that marked differences between communal and personal issues can decline progressively. The work carried out on the community project can help, but personal commitment on the part of each is necessary as is the concern to serve the community and the mission. Brothers can then truly help each other making personal progress. Sometimes, much time may be needed to reach that spirit of communion. However, one must not desist from going through that process; rather, one must believe it to be possible with the grace of God.

Is this an idyllic, non realistic vision of the apostolic community? Here and there, even with lay people involved, some communities are working in that direction and feel that, if it not easy to make headway, travelling the road is a source of grace. It must be underscored that this spiritual community process presupposes a high level of fraternal charity so that all may be listened to with attention and respect. If there is no full freedom of speech for all, we cannot possibly hope to hear the Spirit. One should also recall that the role of the community superior is vital. After having listened and discerned with his Brothers, he must, when necessary, decide in keeping with what he feels is best for his Brothers and for the mission as well as in accordance with the process of discernment agreed to in community. It is therefore

important that all accept the decision with faith and openness. Every decision taken in this manner produces fruits which come from the Spirit: charity, unity, fecundity for the mission, etc... These fruits, which are there for all to see, confirm the appropriateness of the decision that has been taken.

#### 4) THE COMMUNITY, FIRST MISSION GROUND

*“Spread love wherever you go, first and foremost in your own house. Love your children, your husband or your wife, your next door neighbour... Do not let anyone who has come to you not go away better and happier. Be the living expression of God’s kindness: kindness of your face, of your gaze, of your smile, of your warm-hearted welcome,”* said Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Our founder held particularly dear that unity of life: *“The spirit of the Congregation is a spirit of peace and of charity; Brothers shall live together in the most perfect union, mutually loving and helping each other.”*<sup>36</sup> He develops this in the Rule of the Daughters of Providence: *“Charity is the accomplishment of the law; it is the new law; it is the bond of perfection, the commandment of the Lord; whoever does not live by it is dead: the spouse of Jesus Christ, full of that holy love, should therefore be resplendent and burning of that love which is God; charity must be her abode, her life, her beginning, the end of all her actions, the crown of her sacrifice.”*<sup>37</sup>

##### 1. Prophecy of communion

Our communities are places where communion is lived, where charity which is God is practised. It is in their midst that we

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<sup>36</sup> Rule of 1823.

<sup>37</sup> *Jean-Marie de la Mennais, An Anthology taken from his writings*, Marcel Doucet, p. 184.

learn to love in deed. Our communities are “homes” of communion.

They are also “schools” of communion. In community, we experience the conversion required to grow in true charity. In other words, when we love our Brothers as they are, and not as we would like them to be, we love in truth, without deluding ourselves. The community is a school of charity which makes us humble. Such a task, in fact, is a never-ending process which we resume every morning.

Our communities are also communities that spread the Good News by the love that unites their members. They are a prophecy of communion. Without our knowing it, fraternal love witnesses to those who see us. We very often wonder how to give “meaning” to our vocation, how to make it visible. There is only one thing to do: love each other as brothers. When I was student in a Brothers’ school, I recall having been moved by the joy which permeated the Brothers’ relations which impacted favourably on lay teachers and, in turn, benefited the students.

Charity in deed generates joyful togetherness and witnesses to its Source. The community then becomes a missionary community. It imparts the Spirit because the Spirit abides in it. Beyond words, the witness of unity moves young people and children to whom the community is sent.

Here, we cannot pass over in silence the question of vocational pastoral ministry. In fact, the only kind of community which can entice young people to its way of life is the community which exudes the joy of living together and of generous openness to others. In the word of John Paul II, *“Religious life will be all the more meaningful as it is successful at building up fraternal communities which seek God and love him above all else. On the other hand, its raison d’être will be denied every time it ignores the dimension of Christian love which consists in building up a*

*‘small family’ with those who have received the same calling.”<sup>38</sup>* As Enzo Bianchi comments, *“a young man will more spontaneously join a community where he feels loved and where he realises that he can grow in love”<sup>39</sup>*. Our communities must become prophecies of communion. The Lord will then send to them – when he so wishes and in the manner he chooses, – those whom he calls to a vocation to the Brotherhood. We can be sure of one thing, however: young people will not come to us if we do not love each other as brothers.

## 2. Praying community

To love in such a way, making no distinction between persons, presupposes that the community is convened by the Spirit and that it comes together to celebrate the Love that keeps it together. One cannot stress enough the importance of the daily community prayer which brings together all the Brothers.

If a Brother is absent on a regular basis from community prayer, his confreres should do everything in their power to invite him back. The community cannot be idle on that score. It must always bear in mind that things can change and that such an attitude is not inevitable.

Brothers should pray for that Brother. They should then question themselves as to the best way to reach out to him. This will no doubt imply in-depth reconciliation. All too often, in fact, what has been left unsaid chokes mutual trust and one may be strongly tempted to seek refuge in the status quo. Openness of heart can only be had in reconciliation among Brothers. The

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<sup>38</sup> John Paul II to the participants of the plenary meeting of the CIVCSVA, November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1992.

<sup>39</sup> Enzo Bianchi, *L'entrée des jeunes dans la vie religieuse*, in Nouvelle revue théologique, Oct. Dec. 2007, p. 612.

Lord's blessings are so abundant when Brothers all come together in his presence.

We have to be grateful to the Brothers, especially the older ones, who spend free time in the oratory before the Lord, whether during daytime or when others are asleep. They are the heart and soul of our communities. They are the rock other Brothers rely on for support. Their brotherly presence and their silent prayer are a grace which obtains countless benefits for us all.

### **3. Silent listening to the Word**

A community that listens to the Word and puts it into practice is a community that shines forth. The morning meditation is an ideal time for Jesus, Word of the Father, to mysteriously transform hearts even better than a potter fashions his work. Let us safeguard that half hour, giving it all our care. Each one helps the other by the quality of his silence and of his attention. The oratory then becomes the Upper Chamber where the apostles, together with the Virgin Mary, allow themselves to be schooled by the Spirit. Let not our words distract us from the Lord's. Let us allow him to speak to each one, in his own language, for he knows us through and through.

### **4. Community sharing of the Word**

There will come a time for listening to the Word as a community. Blessed are those moments when Brothers agree to share what God speaks to each one. Thus, as sharing takes place, personal threads intertwine with others, sketching out the Spirit-inspired pattern, until Jesus weaves individual fibres into the fabric of his message to all.

This experience of sharing the Word as a community is invaluable. It is carried out in close liaison with the Eucharist

where we commune to the Word made flesh and where the Word of God becomes our nourishment. It may be desirable to give this community sharing of the Word a different and longer period of time than that consecrated to the morning meditation as they are two different spiritual exercises. One does not replace the other. Each represents a grace for the disciples, travelling companions with the Master.

The Lectio Divina thus becomes an exercise that is part of life. The time given by each to the personal and daily listening of the Word allows the morning meditation to be a place of peaceful attention to the loving motions of the Spirit in each one. That time is also a blessing for the community as it prepares for deeper moments of joint reading and sharing of the Word.

### **5. Community revision of life**

Rather than talking about assessing community-agreed projects, could we not also commit ourselves to making, with much greater intensity, a true revision of life, the Lectio Vitae, a community exercise? More than just analysing common endeavours, it is a matter of adopting a spiritual perspective. Basically, what we are talking about in these pages invites us to live our mission in the Spirit. To assess the manner in which this mission is carried out amounts to opening ourselves up to the signs the Lord gives us and to evaluating, when hearing the Lord's calls, the authenticity and the suitability of our responses.

This exercise which we are called upon to perform personally every day could also be carried out as a community periodically. Of course, one must, here again, set aside adequate time so as not to rush through a sharing that circumvents the benefits of personal commitment.

I encourage communities that are already doing so, and those that feel called to do so, to engage joyfully in this exercise.

Their experience is a treasure that can benefit others. Is not this mutual support in the Congregation a way of achieving communion?

## **IV**

### **CONSECRATED CELIBACY**

#### **WITH A VIEW TO LOVE**

Certain persons may ask themselves: “Is it becoming for bachelors to be speaking about love?” It is possible even for Brothers themselves to question that fundamental orientation: Am I capable of love? What motivates, in fact, my decision to make such a commitment? Why haven’t I also decided to get married? Such a question may at times spring to mind. It may even shake the foundations of a vocation that has been clearly discerned at the time of initial formation. It is appropriate, therefore, to recall the origin and the motives of such a choice. The following pages are an invitation to each Brother to reaffirm his life’s choice and

thereby develop his personality's assets for a life of love that is lived lucidly and joyfully. This is a must for all and for the very vitality of the Congregation. In the words of Enzo Bianchi, "A religious community can acquire an eloquence that will allow the Gospel message to transpire with simplicity and directness thanks to the human quality of its common life of celibacy in the context of a Church that is sensationalised in the mass media, that is too preoccupied with penultimate matters and that has secularised or moralised her message."<sup>40</sup>

### **1) THE CONSECRATED CELIBACY OPTION**

Some people have chosen celibacy as a social ideal, for the sake of a service to humanity, to the poor. Some even aspire to a communal ideal that is secular in nature. Others, because of personal history, health problems or a number of reasons have to remain single even if this is not what they had initially hoped for.

Without denying the inroads of grace in these people's life, we as religious are convinced that true commitment to celibacy cannot but rest on Love who is Christ himself. Jesus is the genuine motive of our commitment to consecrated celibacy.

The disciples were enticed by the person of Jesus. They were fascinated by his love. This unique spiritual experience has transformed them. Has not Peter been moved to the very depths of his being when Jesus asked him: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

Of course, all Christians are called to experience the love of Jesus, a love that reaches out to them personally. Besides, those who are moved by that love, to the extent that they surrender

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 616.

themselves entirely to Christ through consecrated celibacy, are Christians like any others. They feel called to commit the whole of their existence to Christ in such a way that it has no meaning outside of him. They are convinced that their happiness, their *raison d'être* and the fullness of life can only be found in him. That state in life harks back to an inner “dream”, the dream of a life fully centred in Christ who marshals all the spiritual and human energies of a person.

It is an experience of love. As in marriage, so in consecrated celibacy: it is a way of loving which is exclusive. *“The great social ideals will never suffice to give religious life its full depth if love of God, the experience of being enticed by him, is not evident in those who commit themselves... Those who are smitten with true love wish to give up the whole of their life and of their person for its sake. It is the challenge of every marriage as it is of every religious life. Each of these commitments in the Church... is a call to love, and the vow of chastity, like marriage, is a consecration of love. It implies choosing God as the be-all and end-all of one’s existence through the offering of all of one’s resources, of all of one’s being, in the following of Christ.”*<sup>41</sup>

Love is at the heart of the call that we have received. As Theresa of the Child Jesus would say, *“Love calls me.”* Our vow of chastity witnesses to the world that we have chosen Jesus as our only travelling companion. Our Brothers are with us because they have answered the same call. With them, we recall that we have been chosen and called by our name. How can we, among Brothers, joyfully celebrate the personal love which binds each of us to the Lord? It seems to me that the annual retreats are peak moments of community meetings during which we are in a position to realise how intensely each one’s life is intimately

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<sup>41</sup> Yves Bériault, o.p., Master of novices.

united to Jesus. Our joy, a holy joy, is the greater as retreat times are well lived.

This may very well be the joy of which Saint Augustine speaks when he asks: “*Who can live without affection?*” And he goes on to say: “*Do you think, brothers, that those who fear God, honour him and love him are incapable of affection?*” To which he answers: “*There is a delight in the Lord which is the true Sabbath and the true rest...*”<sup>42</sup>

The choice of celibacy is a choice in favour of a greater love. The life that is offered will gradually be transfigured if our commitment to the Lord is whole-hearted in spite of the inevitable aridity which is the lot of every love that grows and matures. A few months before he passed away, one of our older Brothers shared with his confreres this word of Elizabeth of the Trinity: “*The belief that a being called Love lives in me day in day out is what has made my life a heaven by anticipation.*” May this be our own experience!

## 2) TO BE SON AND BROTHER LIKE JESUS!

As from 12, Jesus said to his earthly family: “*Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?*” (Luke 2, 49) Jesus cannot but be wholly his Father's. His identity is that of a Son. He is the eldest of a multitude of brothers who are the baptised. Consecrated celibacy plunges us even more deeply in what constitutes the identity of Jesus. His identity becomes our identity. We are the “signs” of

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<sup>42</sup> Commentary on psalm 76 where he develops his concept of delight in God.

that identity to the extent that we live fully the vocation which makes us “brothers” in the image of the Beloved Son.

A Brother is consecrated to God for the salvation of the world. The Brother’s vocation is that of a “son who has been sent” to proclaim the coming Kingdom through his life and his word. The love of his life is the Father, in the same way that Jesus was totally his Father’s. The motto “God Alone” holds a very special meaning for a Brother. He has neither wife nor children. He is with his God in the midst of his Brothers. He is a son who, in Jesus the only Son, abandons himself in the arms of his Father. Of course, every Christian is a “child of God”. However, the religious’ vocation is to make this known, to be a witness to this through a way of life that has been stamped by the vows of religious obedience, of evangelical poverty and of consecrated celibacy. His prayer, his silent and burning heart-to-heart dialogue with the Lord, listening to his Word, oftentimes in the night of faith, is the source of the fecundity of his consecrated life.

In short, the fundamental identity of the Brother is to reproduce the state of life of the Son when he was on earth. He is not holier than others for all that. The sanctity of his life consists in answering the call of his vocation the best way possible. However, he will grow in holiness only to then extent that he lives fully that for which he has been called.

When Jesus said “*Let little children come to me*”, he saw in them the living signs of the call to all to be sons of the Father, in his image. They are, in a manner of speaking, what religious have to signify through their religious consecration, namely, the sign that every man is loved and cherished for himself. This is why children are our brothers and sisters. We too are “children”, “sons” through a “new” mode of physical existence inaugurated with Christ. Our way of life signifies that to which all are called.

This is at the very heart of our identity as Brothers, today, yesterday and tomorrow.

### **3) *RENOUNCING ONE'S LIFE TO LOVE IN TRUTH***

Thus, the Gospel provokes us, as did Jesus, to place the uniqueness of our life of celibacy at the service of our filial relationship to the Father, in the Spirit, and of his fraternal relationship to every person, especially the little ones, the poor and the powerless.

This requires a life of commitment as well as a life of wisdom and clear-headedness. Our world does not encourage consecrated celibacy as a way of life. We must love the world without being taken in by it. We must be clear-headed about ourselves and ceaselessly question the coherence of our life. If we do not gaze upon Jesus daily through prolonged personal prayer, we shall not be able to reproduce his image. If we do not, as he did, spend time freely to be with the Father, letting him speak to us and transfigure our heart, we shall not truly feel like sons.

Young people, particularly, pay closer attention to us than we think. Since we have neither wife nor children, they want to see where lies our happiness. Very often, without admitting it, they wish to know what is the love that gives meaning to our life. They wonder what the cause of our joy might be. Are we in a position to reveal to them the source of that joy? If our lives do not radiate happiness, how will they ever get to know the Father who loves them?

I would like to address myself to each Brother personally and ask him: What is the “love” that fills your life? Can you answer that question truthfully?

Love Jesus. Before carrying the Good News to young people, try carrying it in your heart. Like Jesus, love the Father. The Spirit will lead you on a road of light, of peace and of happiness.

Do not let idols lay hands on you. Be vigilant. There are very many deceptions awaiting you if you are not clear about your vow of consecrated celibacy. Avoid double-dealing. Fix your gaze, but especially your heart, on the light that does not deceive. If you truly wish to follow Jesus, break away from the false gods that kill hope and love. Fear not letting go, out of love, even that which seems wonderful, just like Jesus who gave up his life out of love. If you give up everything, true joy will be yours. If you do not give up everything, you will not find the happiness that love gives. Committing one’s life to consecrated celibacy is setting off on the road to martyrdom. Have you made up your mind? Don’t you see? There lies your happiness.



## CONCLUSION

Mary is the witness and model of the heart whence fraternal love gushes forth.

*“The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil”* (Luke 6, 45). Mary is that heart which, moulded by the Spirit, brings treasures of peace and of love to the world.

With Mary, we get to know Jesus and to receive his Words of life. Thus, when he teaches the “Our Father” to his disciples, this brotherly prayer par excellence, Mary joins them and through her example, helps them live daily this sharing among sons of the same Father and the forgiveness forever revived which strengthens the bonds of fraternal communion.

Mary is at the heart of our fraternal life as she is in our mission. She educates our heart to kindness and gentleness without which there can be no fraternal life that shines forth. She is also the guardian of our fraternity if we place our trust in her.

When she hastens to her cousin Elizabeth, love carries her. She makes haste in order to serve. She has but one concern: to serve. Mary does not wish to be served. She is the humble handmaid of the Lord; she watches over us to come to our help.

Using Saint Paul’s words about Charity, we can say that Mary is obliging, she does not seek her own interest, she is not provoked, she does not rejoice in unrighteousness but rejoices

with the truth. She bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (Cf 1 Corinthians 13, 4-7)

When Mary greets Elizabeth, says the evangelist Saint Luke, John the Baptist leaps for joy in her womb and is filled with the Holy Spirit. And Mary sings “My soul glorifies the Lord...”

With Mary, we learn that gratuitous love brings the gifts of the Spirit to fruition. Brotherhood lived in mutual service gives rise to the fruits of the Spirit. A heart that turns its attention to others in need is a heart that sings in the Spirit.

If you are looking for joy, give some of your time to those who don't have any. If you are looking for happiness, give happiness to those who are looking for it. And in everything, give thanks to God. With Mary, sing “My soul glorifies the Lord...”

*“Those who have charity are born of God; those who do not have it are not born of God. This is the ultimate sign, the hallmark of discernment. [...] Charity is the precious stone without which everything that you may have amounts to nothing, and which, by itself, suffices.”*<sup>43</sup>

Such is the blessing of being a Brother.

Brother Yannick Houssay, s.g.  
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Last day of the week of prayer for the Unity of Christians

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<sup>43</sup> Saint Augustine, Commentary on the first epistle of Saint John V, 7, quoted in *Le bonheur d'être chaste*, by a Carthusian monk, Presses de la Renaissance, p. 188 – 2004.







