



**« FOR HE WHO HAS BECOME YOUR
SPOUSE IS YOUR MAKER »**

(Is 54, 5)

CONSECRATED CHASTITY

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BROTHERS OF CHRISTIAN INSTRUCTION

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Table of abbreviations

Council Vatican II:

- AA: Apostolicam Actuositatem, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity
- AG: Ad Gentes, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church
- DV: Dei Verbum, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation
- GS: Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World
- LG: Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church
- OT: Optatam Totius: Decree on Priestly Training
- PO: Presbyterium Ordinis, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests
- PC: Perfectae Caritatis, Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life

Apostolic exhortations:

- ET: Evangelica Testificatio, Apostolic Exhortation of Paul VI on the Renewal of the Religious Life, June 29, 1971
- OE: Orientamenti Educativi, 1974
- RM: Redemptoris Missio, John Paul II, July 12, 1990
- SC: Sacerdotalis Coelibatus, Paul VI, June 24, 1967
- VC: Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II on Consecrated Life, March 25, 1996.

Others:

- CCC: Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992

INTRODUCTION

Brothers, who are we? For a few months, now, we have attempted to establish our identity, an issue that seems to concern many people, even outside religious life and the Church. Is it because we find it difficult to position ourselves in the world? Have we lost the “garment” that suited us so well on the day of our first vows or at the time of our perpetual profession? We did not question our identity at the start of our religious life. All recognized us as such. We ourselves had clearly identified our place and our mission, or at least we thought so. The “garment” of our identity fitted us perfectly. We rejoiced at the fact that we had “put on Christ” according to the charism of John Mary de la Mennais in the religious family that had attracted us.

It is not my intention, far from it, to discuss the theme of identity in this circular. I would rather broach the subject of our vocation as Brothers through one of our three vows, that of consecrated chastity.

To launch into a relevant presentation of that vow, it is preferable to take into account individual persons, their personal journey, their age and culture and the stage they are going through. The vow of chastity may not mean the same to us at 20 years old as it does at 40 or 60 or more. If I must rely on each Brother to glean from these general considerations what suits him best, my hope is to arouse in each one the wish to make the religious life more meaningful through a better understanding of the vow of chastity.

We are fashioned by our successes and failures, our achievements and our setbacks. In this way, the image of Christ in us takes shape in spite of our sin and through God's mercy. Thus, the garment that the Spirit has prepared for each of us in the communion of the same charism makes of us true disciples of Christ whom the Father welcomes to his banquet.

I shall look at the vow of chastity from the angle of the spirituality that subtends it. I would also love to show how the beauty of the vow, in keeping with each one's uprightness of heart, can shed light on our life. A more profound grasp of the meaning of consecrated celibacy entails delving into the inner recesses of our being where dwells the triune God who shines forth on those who have vowed their "virginity" for the Kingdom. Superficial living cannot reveal to us the beauty of a life of total consecration; we would then see it as a burden to be freed from. Numerous, indeed, are the compensations that can blemish a life that is called to shine forth.

Today's society seeks to beguile us. If we are not vigilant, its only message to us could be: "Eat, drink, be merry, consume, have your fill!" This is somewhat meaningless if you seek fullness of life. Haven't we given in to the lure of the sirens' song?

You all know that it is not easy today to speak about this vow. Nevertheless, in all parts of the world, all those who live by

the vow of chastity witness to an intimacy and an inner strength that all are looking for. More than ever before, the world needs men and women who are in the world without being of the world, like the leaven that promises life whose meaning is found in a reality beyond the here and now.

“For he persevered as though he could see the one who is invisible” it is said of Moses” (He 11, 27). The Brother, consecrated to God, consecrated by God, is called upon to stand firm *“as if he saw the Invisible”* (D 8), placing his faith in Him who is for him *“a fountain of water springing up to eternal life”* (John 4, 14)

In the first part, we shall recall that all Christians, whether in marriage or consecrated celibacy, are called to holiness.

Following which we shall try to better understand the meaning of a life totally dedicated to God in consecrated chastity.

Then, bearing in mind our human frailty, we shall look at what in our everyday living can help us live up to the demands of this vow in the Church and in today’s world.¹

¹ The 150th anniversary of the death of John Mary de la Mennais shall not be referred to here. We must wait for the official opening of the John Mary de la Mennais year, in November 2010, to celebrate our Founder. For the time being, Provinces and Vice-Provinces are immersed in the preparations of this commemorative year.

1

ALL CALLED TO UNCOMPROMISING LOVE

In the following pages, as I have said in another circular, I address myself to the Brothers only. Although I could have chosen to write to the Mennaisian Family as a whole, I think that it is fitting to give each one what suits him. The Superior general has a specific mission towards the Brothers as defined by Canon Law and the Rule of Life. His mission towards the lay people of the Mennaisian Family is slightly different. A dialogue between the Superior general and the Brothers is therefore necessary and allows him to broach subjects that are specific to them owing to their consecration, their mission and their belonging to the Congregation.

Experience shows, however, that lay persons can find appropriate nourishment in circulars. They can draw what seems best for them and adapt it to their vocation. Other publications such as the *La Mennais Magazine*, the *Études Mennaisiennes*, the *Letter to the*

Mennaisien Family as well as such writings as the *Spirituality of a Man of Action*, *15 jours pour prier avec Jean-Marie de la Mennais*, etc. are all sources of on-going formation.

While broaching the vow of chastity for the Brothers, we shall bear in mind the wealth that comes from sharing vocations in a Church-communion-of-vocations. Within the Mennaisian Family, we have been favoured to experience that all are called upon to share a love the source of which is God. The grace of our baptism allows us to live our common vocation to holiness through more specific vocations in married life, celibacy, consecrated life or the priesthood.

It is through this Spirit-inspired diversity that the Church is enriched and that the Good News of Christ who came into the world to save us is heard. Those who belong to the Family receive and experience the Mennaisian charism for the benefit of the People of God, each according to the personal charisms entrusted to him by the Spirit. The call to consecrated celibacy is one such charism² which embellishes the Church and which is lived most frequently within the charism of the congregation. It is comforting to know that in the Church, all receive from the Spirit gifts that contribute to the growth of the whole Body and to the sanctification of our brothers and sisters.

May I add that this circular is coming to you at the very heart of a year the theme of which is “Forging bonds the way Jesus does”. I hope to show that consecrated celibacy leads to universal

² The term « charism » calls up different realities that are at one with each other since they are gifts of the Spirit. “To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the benefit of all,” says Saint Paul (1 Co 12, 7). For example, here are some of its uses in the writings of Vatican Council II which speaks of the “charism of the infallibility of the Church” (LG 25) as well as of “those charisms, even the most simple ones” (AA 3) that the lay faithful receive. For the Council, “the missionary vocation that is born in the heart of individuals” and “Religious Institutes” given rise to by the Spirit, are also charisms.

brotherhood. To be a Brother is our personal way, like Jesus, of forging bonds of love and of fraternity with one and all.

1. The Radical Nature of Love

Christ does not establish degrees of perfection. He speaks to all, even if he can speak to each one in a specific way and ask each one what only he can contribute. For Him, each one is unique but all belong to his family. He excludes no one. He entrusts a mission to each one. He invites those who seek greatness to be humble in the service of others. He invites us to be like children for theirs is the Kingdom, but he also invites us to be adults in the faith.

All are called to unconditional love. One cannot be a half-hearted Christian. The lukewarm cannot be “companions” of Jesus. Anyone who understands the law of love cannot be satisfied with love that sets itself limits. You all know the excuses given by the invited guests to the banquet: “*I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please excuse me.*” Such an answer provokes the master’s reply: “*Not one of those individuals who were invited will taste my banquet!*” (Lk 14, 18; 24).

The unique commandment of love sums up the Gospel. “*The holiness of the Church is fostered in a special way by the observance of the counsels proposed in the Gospel by Our Lord to His disciples*” (LG 42).

Thus, the virtue of chastity is not reserved to religious alone. It is the “quality of love” says a Carthusian monk. Whether in celibacy or married life, all are called to the perfection of love, a love that is pure, chaste, selfless and freely given. Such is the quality of love that we must set our sights on, on the long, difficult but wonderful journey of life.

Jesus forever invites us to uprightness of heart so that we may love even to the gift of our own life those whom we love. To

forgive seventy times seven, to give without hope of return, etc. are calls to all. In all cultures, these demands, if they are to be met, require a deep-rooted and living relationship with Christ. Not only are all asked to give up non-essentials, but also some of their vital necessities, like the widow of the Gospel.

Only the heart that has been moved by the Lord can grasp the meaning of a proscription such as the one Jesus addresses to his disciples: “*Whoever looks at a woman to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart*” (Mt 5, 28). The other is not an object but a person for whom we should be ready to deny ourselves. The beauty of love is at no less a price.

These life’s demands imply total self-giving on the part of religious, but they are also an invitation to all. One frequently meets people, youths in particular, who willingly give one or several years of their life for the most destitute. We know such young people, Mennaisians or belonging to other groups or associations, whose minds and hearts have been open to a more total gift of self. True love cannot bear turning away from the distress of others. How often has not this word of Christ challenged us as we met poor people on the way: “*You did it for me*” (cf. Mt 25). To love the poor is to become poor with him. Otherwise, it is mere show, it is not love.

2. A Body for the Lord

A man goes and meets a woman, different from him, with his whole being, on the physical, psychological and spiritual levels. This loving encounter is total and exclusive, otherwise it is not true and it is not chaste. Chastity makes for the selfless, definitive and total gift of self. To one’s partner, a man or a woman gives his/her all. This is the spousal communion to which John Paul II referred to in a catechesis on June 25, 1980: “*The human body is a living word of love that surrenders itself and creates communion.*”

The married man gives his wife his body, his heart and his soul, his whole being and his wife reciprocates. They both dedicate themselves to each other to become “one flesh”.

Their bodies are a revelation and a mediation of love which unites them and sets them off on a true journey to holiness. In his homily for the beatification ceremony of Luigi and Maria Beltrame Quattrocchi, on October 21, 2001, John Paul II stated: “*Dear families, today we have the remarkable confirmation that the road to holiness that is traveled together, as partners, is possible, wonderful, extraordinarily productive and that it is vital for the welfare of the family, the Church and society.*”

As far as the consecrated person is concerned, he gives himself entirely to God. He finds fulfilment in Him. He belongs in a special way to Christ and his response to His love is the definitive and exclusive gift of self to Him. This is the gift of consecrated chastity, a specific vocation in the Church and for the Church.

A Brother thus becomes the abode of this particular presence of Christ. His consecrated virginity is “symbol and outcome” of love for Christ and of Christ’s love. With Jesus, he can say: “*Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me... Then I said, ‘Here I am: I have come’*” (He 10, 5; 7). In this sense, the Pauline expression: “*The body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body*” (1 Co 6, 13) takes on its full force. Radical love for Christ, in fact, entails the commitment of our body as well as of our mind and soul.

The Church herself, Body of Christ, is sign of the love of God for the world. It is the home where self-giving love is fulfilled, a love that is chaste, a love that liberates whoever surrenders himself to another. Our body is called upon to be sign and expression of this self-giving love which militates against self-love.

A man and a woman give themselves to each other through the gift of their bodies. Theirs is an exclusive gift in love which

opens them up to life. In a similar fashion, the consecrated person gives himself totally to Christ and to Him alone, body and soul, in a love that the Spirit makes fruitful. The vow of consecrated chastity leads the religious on the road of gradual identification with Christ in His human condition. Such a commitment transforms one's whole being and manifests man's filial relationship with God even more than the condition of husband and wife. The state of life of the consecrated religious engenders, through his vocation, bonds of fraternity. Body, mind and heart, everything in him belongs to God. He belongs to God the same way a child belongs to his father. In God and in the Church, he is a brother to all.

3. God, Source of Love

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness...’” (Gn 1, 26a). Alone at the summit of creation, man seeks Him in whose image he is. In the created world, hankering after the knowledge of his origins, he is unsatisfied. The quest of God is an essential part of his being.

“The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a companion for him who corresponds to him’” (Gn 2, 18). As man gave names to animals and birds of the air and wild beasts... *“no companion who corresponded to him was found”* (Gn 2, 20). Then *“the Lord God made a woman from the part he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. Then the man said, ‘This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!’”* (Gn 2, 23) The man and the woman become for each other a revelation, image of God. However, attracted to each other as they are, they ultimately feel called to turn to God and desire Him. *“The invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself”* (DV 2). This fellowship leads to universal brotherhood. *“There is a certain likeness between the*

union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity” (GS 24, 3).

The love of a man and of a woman introduces to fellowship with God. A real exchange is established between them since they are called to be but one flesh. Nevertheless, a human being is always alone before one's partner. The love that unites them is revelation and mediation, but it is also “nostalgia and call” from another Love, for it is in God alone that true fellowship is possible. Throughout their married life and through a slow and faithful maturation process, partners purify their love from selfish encumbrances.

Those who make the vow of chastity seek the same conversion without the mediation of the flesh. They forgo the genital expression of sexuality but not the profound dynamism which leads them to others in self-giving. Consecrated chastity neutralises neither affectivity nor sexuality. On the contrary, it enhances the profound meaning of human sexuality as total gift of self to God and to others. *“Only he who can affirm that his celibacy has not only not shut the doors of love, but has taught him to find love, can proclaim the full force of his virginity.”*³

A man naturally unites himself with a woman to be one flesh with her. Children, fruit of their love, are born from this union. Progressively, however, God shows them that their fecundity does not stem only from the carnal expression of their love and of their mutual gift. He transfigures that union so that they become receptive to another fruitfulness which comes from the Spirit.

This is the only fecundity which the consecrated person wishes for himself, and only union with God, not personal merit, can grant him that fecundity. It is a free gift from God. Such a vo-

³ Arnaldo Pigna, *Appunti per una spiritualità dei voti*. French Éditions des Bénédictines under the title: *Repartir de Jésus Christ, la spiritualité des vœux*, p. 134

cation cannot be understood outside of a faith perspective. *“And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is useless... we should be pitied more than anyone”* (1 Co 15, 18-19). It is a clear sign that God alone can quench the thirst for love which man’s heart craves for. Through his consecration, a Brother lays himself bare before men, just as he is before God: a child. He draws his life from God. If he loves God above all else, he finds happiness and passes on to others the life that he receives from Him.

4. The Vocation of all Christians

- From the Old to the New Testament

In the Old Testament, virginity is a provisional state of affairs pending marriage. Forgoing marriage is a sign of sterility and the lack of children spells misfortune. This is why the prophets, glorious page after glorious page, speak so wonderfully of God’s alliance with his people in terms of nuptials: *“For your husband is the one who made you – He is called ‘God of the entire earth.’ Indeed, the Lord will call you back like a wife who has been abandoned and suffers from depression... For a short time I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you”* (Is 54, 5-7).

As for Jeremiah’s celibacy, which is an exception, it is willed by God as a sign of the sterility of an unfaithful people. Such is the misfortune of infertility, for the gift of life to children is a sign of God’s blessing.

With the New Testament, true life comes from the Spirit, not from the flesh. Mary gives birth to a son through the Holy Spirit since she has no relations with a man. Fecundity is transfigured. The normal course of action which is marriage signifies the higher reality of the gift of divine life. Henceforth, a genuine union is that between the Word and humanity, that of the Incarnation. Human marriage is the symbol of that “mystical” marriage between Christ

and the Church in which all men and women are called to enter through baptism.

In the Old Testament, virginity is the state of young people in anticipation of marriage. In the New Testament, marriage is like a journey that gradually leads to loving the way Jesus does, virginally, that is radically centred on God, source of all fecundity. This may very well be the meaning of the words of Jesus: *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother, and wife and children, and brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple”* (Lk 14, 25). All are called to grow up until they bear spiritual fruits that gush forth from a “spousal” relationship with God in the Church, Spouse of Christ.

- Living the way Jesus does

Adopting the ways of the new Covenant implies listening to Jesus, but it also presupposes contemplating the way he lives. His life speaks as much as his word. *“Jesus himself is the ‘Good News’, as he declares at the very beginning of his mission in the synagogue at Nazareth, when he applies to himself the words of Isaiah about the Anointed One sent by the Spirit of the Lord (cf. Lk 4:14-21). Since the ‘Good News’ is Christ, there is an identity between the message and the messenger, between saying, doing and being. His power, the secret of the effectiveness of his actions, lies in his total identification with the message he announces: he proclaims the “Good News” not just by what he says or does, but by what he is”* (RM 13).

The contemplation of Jesus teaches us what the Father’s spousal love for humanity is. Jesus is a virgin because he belongs wholly to the Father and is not his own. He forever proceeds from the Father and is an offering to the Father. He receives from the Father the benefits which he pours in abundance upon all who come to Him. It is through his flesh that the Word is self-giving,

pure love. He is born for self-giving. He is born to die out of love for the Father and for us. This is the true and full sense of the uncompromising love to which God calls us, this capacity to die for love, that is, to be total gift of self in the likeness of Jesus.

Mary, in her immaculate conception through the power of the Spirit, can be nothing but total gift of self to God and to mankind. Because she has received everything from God, she gives everything to God. Our contemplation of Mary leads us to understand what living in the likeness of Christ is. Mary is the model of those who commit themselves to consecrated virginity. Mary is the perfect embodiment of that vocation wherein lies her fecundity. She is the model of every Christian who learns from her self-giving love that the Spirit makes fruitful.

- The Disciple of Christ in the Church

Every Christian is called upon to be the “medium” of the Incarnation of the Word. To give God a body, to be, through God’s blessing, a body for God, such is our vocation and such is the channel of our fruitfulness.

Whether he is married, consecrated or a priest, every Christian is called upon to be the Church with his brothers and sisters in intense fellowship with the people of God. Through baptism, he is no more his own; he belongs to his Creator and Saviour. God enables him to love his fellowmen selflessly. This is the dimension that constitutes the charism of the religious, his specific witnessing. Even so, all are called to belong to God alone. That vocation is therefore an identity in the making, a progressive transformation of the whole being. It is a vocation to become a “virgin” through a life wholly given to God.

In the Church, every Christian is called upon to be a “spouse”. The fact that one belongs to God normally excludes the

possibility of belonging to someone else in the same way. As a member of the Church, every Christian engages in a spousal relationship which is that of the Church with Christ, a relationship that is symbolised by marriage and epitomized in the consecrated life. The consecrated person, in fact, embodies this unique bond which each and every one should have with Christ in the great fellowship of the Church. *“The same tradition has also emphasized in the consecrated life the aspect of a particular covenant with God, indeed of a spousal covenant with Christ, of which Saint Paul was a master by his example (cf. 1 Cor 7:7) and by his teaching, proposed under the Spirit's guidance (cf. 1 Cor 7:40)”* (VC 93).

Lastly, in the Church, every Christian is called to “motherhood”. Such is the wealth of a life that receives its fecundity from God through the Holy Spirit who dispenses the spiritual fruits of the New Covenant. Every life process seeks fulfilment in spiritual fertility. In the end, all are called to be *“a fountain of water springing up to eternal life”* (Jn 4, 14). This is the ultimate condition of every man and of every woman. The religious is called upon to make manifest this fecundity. “His children” are not born of the flesh. Those who receive the gift of the Spirit through the example of his life and the ministry of his word are those on whom, by vocation, he exercises a spiritual “fatherhood” or “motherhood”.

His brothers and sisters lay people rely on his fidelity to remind them that such is their fundamental vocation and he, in turn, relies on their fidelity in marriage as a reminder of the unique and exclusive bond that binds him to God.

FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

The grace of baptism is given to all so that it flourishes either in marriage or celibacy. What makes for the final choice is the meaning given to the personal relationship with Christ. It suffices to open the Gospel and see how Christ forges bonds with people whom he meets to understand what this relationship means. To each he shows a different facet of God. When someone lets himself be seized by God and consecrated to Him, it is not first and foremost to witness to the end of times. Young people who consecrate their virginity to God and dedicate themselves to the service of others in celibacy do so because, all of a sudden, Jesus erupts in their life. This Jesus has become so intimate and has shown so much love that all other dream of love is swept away. Christ appears like the friend who demands an answer.

Y. Raguin, *Célibat pour notre temps*,
quoted in *Le célibat, chemin de vie*,
André Barral-Baron, Cerf.

Can you describe what first attracted you when you decided to become a Brother?

Today, what is your perception of the vow of consecrated chastity for yourself in the Church-communion-of-vocations? What does it mean for you?

FOR HE WHO HAS BECOME YOUR SPOUSE IS YOUR MAKER

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2

THE VOW OF CHASTITY, A SPECIFIC GIFT

Those who are called to consecrated virginity respond in an original way to the universal call to holiness. They enter a way of life in which they forgo the normal lifestyle of most of their fellowmen, that of marriage. It is a matter of “*a choice which finds expression in a radical gift of self for love of the Lord Jesus and, in him, of every member of the human family*” (VC 3). One must have heard a personal call: “*The Lord summoned me from birth*” (Is 49, 1). It is not because a person feels set apart, chosen or preferred that that person can answer love’s call. One should recall the circumstances that led him to become a Brother, for only such a “spiritual experience” gives strength and vigour to our life. “*His*

way of living in chastity, poverty and obedience appears as the most radical way of living the Gospel on this earth, a way which may be called divine, for it was embraced by him, God and man, as the expression of his relationship as the Only-Begotten Son with the Father and with the Holy Spirit” (VC 18).

1. Receiving a Free Gift

“The chastity “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” which religious profess should be counted an outstanding gift of grace” (PC 12a), says Vatican II. It is the mystery of the love of God. God does not make any differences among men. In order to build his Church, he calls each baptised person and entrusts him with a mission. The Brother is attracted by the call he has received while he discovers the wealth of the diversity of vocations that embellish the Church. If Saint Paul wished that all men be like him, he had to accept that “each has his own gift from God” (1 Co 7, 7).

Receiving a specific gift means, in fact, that all do not benefit from that gift, but it also means that all will not understand its meaning. Jesus himself warned his disciples: *“Not everyone can accept this statement, except those to whom it has been given” (Mt 19, 11).* Failure to be understood should not put off those who have received the gift even if at times misunderstandings turn to unwarranted and false accusations. The uprightness of the commitment to consecrated chastity is then questioned. One might be tempted to set things straight, but it is often best to avoid confrontation and to faithfully witness to the inner light which allows one to “see” what others do not see and to trust that God will stand by our side: *“And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you” (Mt 6, 6).*

Consecrated chastity is not a by-product of human effort. *“It reaches, transforms and imbues with a mysterious likeness to Christ man's being in its most hidden depths” (ET 13).* The call to

consecrated celibacy may also be misunderstood by those who receive it. The Lord challenges us: “*If you had known the gift of God*” (Jn 4, 10), the gift you have received! To understand it, heart and mind have to be enlightened by faith. It is not a question of comparing ourselves to others, but to understand the gift received in order to be faithful to it. If we understood what God expects from us, we might feel embarrassed to be so tepid and so hesitant when called upon to give our life.

2. Letting Ourselves be Seized by Christ

“Those who let themselves be seized by this love [of Christ] cannot help abandoning everything to follow him. Like Saint Paul, they consider all else as loss "because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ", by comparison with which they do not hesitate to count all things as "refuse", in order that they "may gain Christ" (Phil 3:8). They strive to become one with him, taking on his mind and his way of life” (VC 18).

Once the call has been received, the only proper response is a total commitment to the one who has moved us. This then becomes the source of unequalled happiness. What prompted Saint Damian of Vuester⁴ to stay in the midst of lepers, alone on his island of Molokai? “*Without the presence of our divine Master in my small chapel, never could I have thrown my lot with that of the lepers of Molokai.*” His contemplation of Christ and of Christ’s love for him enabled him to love those whom no one loved in this “hell of Molokai” where wretchedness and sickness created a world undermined by egotism, despair and immorality.

Those who let themselves be seized by this love of Christ learn that true love shuns egotism, selfishness and the pursuit of

⁴ Saint Damian of Veuster, a member of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and of Mary (Picpus Fathers) was canonised on October 11, 2009.

pleasure for its own sake. “*The religious profession is the action of one whom the person of Christ has captivated...*” says the Rule of Life (D 23) which goes on to say: “*Thereafter, the Brother belongs to God in a new way, as a living parable of the love relationship between God and regenerated mankind: “I will espouse you to me forever,... I will espouse you in fidelity” (Hos 2:21-22)”* (D 24).

Of course, love of God and love of a creature are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, the Brother forgoes what seems normal for a man in favour of a more intimate relationship with God. As has been said, it is a spousal choice. It is a radical choice on a one-way journey in a “state of life” that allows for no other bonds.

We have wanted to follow Jesus through the gift of self to Him. We have given up whatever security money gives. We have the security that God alone can give and that material goods deprive us of. As to the rich young man, Jesus says: “*Go, sell whatever you have and give the money to the poor...*” (Mk 10, 21). For it is to those who have given up everything for His sake that He will give a hundredfold “*in this age ...with persecutions– and in the age to come, eternal life*” (Mk10, 30).

The theme of espousal in the consecrated life has been strongly underlined in the Church from the very beginning to remind us of the intimate bond that unites the religious to God. “*The virgin is the spouse of God,*” Saint Ambrosius would say. She is that spouse, of course, within the Church, Spouse of the Father. One should be prudent when using this spousal language, but without minimising the existential bond that choosing the consecrated life establishes between God and his creature. The Brother does not become attached to a spouse. He finds his happiness in a life totally given to the Lord as a sacrificial and fragrant offering. He is thus like “*the spouse whose heart and life are filled with the*

presence of the other”⁵. If our faith in the loving gaze of the Spouse upon us is too weak, we run the risk, in times of hardship, of wishing for the gaze of some other person to alight upon us. Forging this loving bond with God ensures greater strength in adversity.

Let us admit it: coming across religious who do not seem to know what love is about, who seem afraid, insecure, even bitter at times, is a painful experience. Choosing the vow of chastity, in fact, is the decision of a living and loving person before it is a decision to commit oneself to a service or a mission. We might think that the educational mission can, on its own, incite a young person to become a Brother, and this may have been the case for many. However, consecrated life today needs more than a mission as its foundation. *“One does not choose Christ in order to spread the Good News, but one spreads the Good News because one has chosen Christ and lives by Him. The same applies to a human relationship: one does not get married to share the spouse’s mission, but one shares the mission because one has married him/her”*⁶.

“Reaching out single-mindedly” for Christ who has captivated us, we offer God all the potentialities of our being. Therein lies true joy.

3. Being a Prophet for the World

The religious *“recall to the minds of all the faithful that wondrous marriage decreed by God and which is to be fully revealed in the future age in which the Church takes Christ as its only spouse”* (PC 12). Love transcends the flesh. The life that awaits us is another life. This world passes. We are poor and hum-

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 151

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 151

ble witnesses to the Kingdom of Love that comes. We believe and we hope in its final victory.

Our body that we have reserved for Christ and “given up” out of love for him speaks to the world. Our life becomes a sign of Christ’s Passover, of his death and resurrection. Our body that is given up reveals the intimate link we can have with the Eucharist. We are the body that is given up and the blood that is shed for the salvation of the world in Jesus. We are signs of salvation. Through us, the world receives the revelation of the one we proclaim. *“To some, he has showed the way of celibacy, for the sake of God’s Kingdom, which manifests more clearly and more completely the thoroughly innovative character of the covenant inaugurated by his Incarnation,”* says the Rule of Life (D 35).

When attending a Brother’s funeral, I sometimes ask myself how those present feel about the Brother who leaves no children behind. He has not given birth to sons or daughters who, somehow, are his living memory. Nevertheless, so many people, very many young people at times, attend his funeral when that Brother has unfortunately passed away still engaged in pastoral work or in a school. In fact, they acknowledge that Brother’s very productive life, but a productivity that stems from the radical gift of self and from a boundless love. Our life is prophetic. What is most eloquent is not all that we do; it is our life itself. How could someone who has dedicated himself to God live with such dynamism, such joy and radiating influence?

Is this not what Gandhi had noticed when expressing astonishment at Father Damian of Molokai’s radiating influence: *“If assistance to the lepers is so dear to the heart of Catholic missionaries, it is because no other work demands such a spirit of sacrifice. Such service requires the highest ideals and the most perfect abnegation. The political world and the media have no such heroes of whom they can glorify and who can compare with Father Damian of Molokai. The Catholic Church has thousands of such*

men who, following his example, have sacrificed their lives at the service of lepers. It would be worth finding out what such heroism feeds on.” Do we know what that secret is?

Why did Father de la Mennais want Brothers? He knew that their very lifestyle, lived as an answer to a specific call, was like the living word of Christ. Before they uttered a single word and in spite of their limitations and of their sin, their consecrated life, all focussed on Christ, spoke eloquently. *“The spousal meaning of the consecrated life recalls the Church's duty to be completely and exclusively devoted to her Spouse, from whom she receives every good thing”* (VC 34).

Lay people today come to us with the same feeling. Young people need us even if they cannot say why. They expect of us more than we think because we are “consecrated persons”. Their love may very well outshine our own. We are not asked to keep an account of each other’s “merits”. However, the very vocation of the Brother proclaims the Kingdom. It therefore falls to him to be faithful to that call through the uprightness of a life that testifies to that which he proclaims. Are we mindful of that responsibility?

4. Being Life Carriers in Christ

It is difficult to witness to Christ in a society that lives without him as if it had lost his trail. Yet, nothing is impossible to God. One could write page upon page of testimonies about the fecundity of generous lives in religious consecration, including in our societies that seek to live without God.

The love of a man and of a woman in the sacrament of marriage is a symbol of the love of Christ for the Church. The carnal fecundity of their union suggests a different fecundity in the Spirit. This is why married Christians care for the Christian education of their children for which they hold the first responsibility. They not

only give them life; in this living cell of the Church which is the family, they open the minds and hearts of their children to the saving and liberating Word of Christ.

The only concern of the consecrated celibate is the spiritual fecundity which he takes with him to the grave. He relies solely on the inexhaustible power and astonishingly fruitful love of God. The more he allows the Lord to take possession of him, the more fruits of salvation he bears.

This is what Jesus wished his listeners to understand when people reported that his mother and brothers were outside and wished to see him. His answer places emphasis on the only fecundity for which we will have to give an account, that which comes from listening to his Word: *“My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it”* (Lk 8, 21). In the same way, to the woman who, in the crowd says: *“Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts at which you nursed!”* he replies unequivocally: *“Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!”* (Lk 11, 28)

By the same token, he indirectly reveals the true beauty of Mary. Indeed, in the same Gospel, that of Saint Luke, the angel says to Mary: *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God”* (Lk 1, 35). *“The consecrated life has always been seen primarily in terms of Mary — Virgin and Bride. This virginal love is the source of a particular fruitfulness which fosters the birth and growth of divine life in people's hearts”* (VC 34). Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus embodies the same idea. Did she not write: *“O Jesus, to be you spouse, [...] through my union with you, to be the mother of souls.”* (Autobiographical Manuscripts, B, 2v^o). This is the clear trademark of a consecrated life open unreservedly to the Spirit who makes the heart fruitful and lights up the world.

A Brother's joy comes from his conviction that, owing to the total gift of his life, children and young people are made receptive to the transforming action of the Spirit. Such was Father de la Mennais' wish: "*Love them well in our Lord and spare nothing to show them his love: oh, how dear they must be to you! What great joy for you to have been called to be their father and apostle! Try to become more and more worthy of such a wonderful and holy mission*"⁷.

The only fruitfulness that the Brother hopes for and that fulfills him is birthing forth young and ardent disciples for the Lord. He gives his life so that young people may become upstanding men and women capable of fashioning worthy life works for themselves and for others. Aren't we proud of coming across past pupils whose life's work was a gift for others? Recently, a Brother was proudly displaying prayers written by his pupils as if they were pearls gushing forth from the hearts of his own children. For him, the only thing that mattered was a child opening himself up to the Spirit.

5. Dying to Self to Live in Truth

To be honest, such a choice implies a denial that has to do with the deep aspirations of the human person. It is therefore essential, during formation and at all stages of life, to remain aware of this death to self which this vocation entails. "*The Brother accepts the inevitable loneliness of his condition like a cross to be carried in Christ's footsteps*" (D 37). This denial may at times be a heavy burden to bear. The feeling of loneliness may deeply undermine a person at certain moments in his life. He does not have by his side the physical presence and the conjugal affection which could bring him comfort. The call of paternity, of a home and of a

⁷ To Brother Émeric Autin, September 21, 1844

house of his own, may at times become urgent. God himself, at certain stages of his life, may seem to be absent.

Yet, this aloneness when it is lived in response to a personal and powerful call from Christ is not emptiness; it makes room for God. *“Christ spoke of Himself when He said: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (Jn 12, 24) And the Apostle Paul did not hesitate to expose himself to a daily death in order to obtain among his faithful glory in Christ Jesus. (1 Co 15, 31) In a similar way, by a daily dying to himself and by giving up the legitimate love of a family of his own for the love of Christ and of His kingdom, the priest will find the glory of an exceedingly rich and fruitful life in Christ, because like Him and in Him, he loves and dedicates himself to all the children of God” (SC 30).* What Paul VI here said of the priest is equally true of the Brother in his consecrated celibacy.

I wish to return to our recent saint, Damien of Veuster. No sooner is he ordained (May 21, 1864) than *“he is launched on the faraway beaches of the South East Islands seeking the lost sheep...”* For nine years, he criss-crosses on foot or on horseback the volcanic lands of the big island of Hawaii, baptising, catechising, building churches and schools. Very soon, he finds the words and the body language to communicate with the locals: *“I love my poor islanders very much, he writes. I will gladly give my life for them the way our divine Saviour did. I spare nothing to pay a visit to the sick some 7 or 8 leagues away. I have many crosses and privations here, but I consider myself very happy.”* However, when he falls sick, he finds it hard to accept it. In 1885, the first symptoms of leprosy appear on his body. Month after month, the heavy cloak of leprosy covers him as did the shroud of his perpetual profession. Here is what he writes to his bishop: *“My recalling lying down under the pall on the day of my vows has emboldened me when faced with the danger of contracting this terrible disease*

in the course of my duties and while endeavouring to die more and more to myself.”

Becoming a “eunuch” for the Kingdom means becoming extremely poor, but also infinitely rich in love. The sacrifice of Damian and of so many others testifies to this. The vow of consecrated chastity opens up to the total gift of self in the footsteps of Jesus on the cross. Whoever has surrendered himself in such a way will remain unsatisfied until he has given up his very life. His deepest wish is to be that grain of wheat that dies, but that dies out of love. He then knows that he is fruitful in the likeness of the crucified Christ. True love leads to the gift of self until death. He who loves little, gives little. He who loves much, gives much.

Suffering from leprosy, Father Damian fears neither sickness nor death. He experiences freedom after moments of doubt and of incomprehension. His life rests on an initial potent gesture, that of lying under the burial shroud on the day of his profession. This marked him for life. Acceptance of death, out of love, liberates from fear. To save your life, you must have decided to lose it. Death has no power over us after we have accepted it. Because we have been liberated, we are then enabled to help and sustain those who are fearful and desperate.

FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

Still today, God speaks to mankind in parables. However, if God is man's only happiness, why does he not speak to him openly?

Therein lies one of the most mysterious laws of God's encounter with men. The veiled nature of the word of God which shocks us is, in fact, a requirement of his love, the very condition of the friendly dialogue he wants to forge with each one of us.

If the word of God were not veiled, it would no longer be the word of God: it would be a truth among others, a truth that we could explain without having to change anything in our life or to convert ourselves. If the word of God were self-evident, it would not respect our liberty and would not give rise to a free response of love. Now, the word of God is both a revelation and the gift of a person we can only receive in love.

God is all-powerful, but he makes himself discreet because he takes pleasure in the free, loving response of his creature: he wants our preference.

Claude Geffré, o.p. *Un espace pour Dieu*, Cerf, p. 32-33

You have answered the call to consecrated life. It was and it still is a response of love. Can you again, today, express the gift of your life to God through a prayer or in some other way?

3

CONSECRATED CHASTITY ON A DAILY BASIS

1. Taking a firm decision.

“...Chastity is not acquired all at once but results from a laborious conquest and daily affirmation. Our world today stresses the positive values of love between the sexes but has also multiplied the difficulties and risks in this sphere. In order to safeguard his chastity with all care and affirm its sublime meaning, the priest must consider clearly and calmly his position as a man exposed to spiritual warfare against seductions of the flesh in himself and in the world, continually renewing his resolution to give an ever increasing and ever better perfection to the irrevocable offering of himself which obliges him to a fidelity that is complete, loyal and real” (SC 73).

“The free and generous response to this precious gift involves a difficult, sometimes painful struggle” (D 37). The first

condition for this struggle to be successful is to believe that consecrated virginity is “*an outstanding gift of grace,*” (PC 12a), a gift of the Father “*to certain souls*” (LG 42c). “*The consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church as a decisive element for her mission, since it “manifests the inner nature of the Christian calling” and the striving of the whole Church as Bride towards union with her one Spouse*” (VC 3)

The consecrated life is a gift of the Spirit which makes possible loving more fully and a gift which transcends, as we have said, the normal possibilities of human nature. This gift is received in faith, enlightened by an authentic spiritual experience, and lived up radically and trustfully. It is understood in the light of the Word of God and of Christ’s example.

Our life’s choice, if it is to stand the test of time, relies on a strong experience of the presence of God and of his love. It is grounded in a personal decision arrived at after serious discernment and accompaniment. It matters little whether that experience may have taken place at the time of the call or at some later date. Gradually, we can feel that the Lord fashions us more and more into his likeness. Our life then takes on a new meaning which the light of faith reveals to us. Our faith itself deepens, no more tossing back and forth.

Otherwise, our house is built on sand. As soon as the wind blows too hard, it risks collapsing. The quality and the strength of our choice give direction to our life. Today, on all continents, one cannot keep this commitment without understanding its profound meaning, without having assessed the steadfastness of our resolve to stake our life on that choice and without having undertaken the journey with great generosity.

It is the Holy Spirit who enlightens our intelligence. Without his assistance, no intellectual argument will suffice to justify in our eyes a lifelong commitment which so many people, even in our

own family, do not understand. In this area, the task of persons in charge of formation is most important. They must ensure that a young candidate's experience is sufficiently sound and that he has a personal conviction of the validity of his decision. They exercise their mission through teaching, but even more so through individual counselling for, where formation is concerned, no solid foundations can be laid out without in-depth personal dialogue with each of the candidates. For this, they need the assistance of all the Brothers and, in the first place, of their superiors. Their mission is one of the most important and one of the most wonderful that there is, but it also demands that they should continually work at their own formation.

Such formation does not of itself guarantee fidelity. It makes for sound foundations, it sets off on the journey but it also invites to forever seek the precious pearl in the inner recesses of one's being. It is up to each and every one to follow through. The experience of the noviciate may fade away and lose its guiding incentive if the decision is not renewed daily. The gift received creates in us this inner space which enables us to better understand the value of the given treasure. Ours must be the will to conform to it daily. This is the only way we can be in the likeness of Christ in the midst of needy children to bless them and give them his life.

A sickly or weakened will may give in to deceitful seductions that weaken even further our relationship with God. Our secret infidelities tarnish our love and dim the sense of our consecrated life. The "middling chaste" religious is not a normal and happy person. He deprives himself of true human riches and does not take advantage of the incomparable spiritual riches that result from the total gift of self to God and to his fellowmen. This see-saw situation cannot last forever. He will either give up the struggle or lead a joyless and troubled life. This is equally true of the young man who marries but who, with time, slips into fleeting affairs. The ardour for his wife, once strong and true, dies out in

his heart. Whether in marriage or religious life, one's life's commitment holds only if it rests on a firm decision rather than on a moment's whim!

The Council tells the religious that they must dedicate themselves to consecrated virginity "*magnanimously and wholeheartedly*" (PO 16d). Thus they will shun justifying more or less acknowledged compromises which would undermine the regard and the respect they should have for their vocation.

2. Loving the Way Jesus Does

A short time before he gave up his life, during the washing of feet, Jesus reveals to us "*the meaning of Christian life and, even more, of consecrated life*" which is characterised by "*by service directed in particular to the poorest and neediest*" (VC 75) which contemplates Christ and imitates him in the humble service of all men.

When the Brother makes the vow of chastity, he receives "*by an outpouring of the Spirit (cf. Rom 5:5), the divine agape, his way of loving*" (VC 75). Opening his heart to the Spirit, his journey is a call to a mission. As to Peter who wishes to remain on the mountaintop on the day of Transfiguration, the Lord says: "*Come down, Peter! You wanted to rest up on the mountain: come down. Preach the word of God, be insistent both when it is timely and when it is not; reprove, exhort, give encouragement using all your forbearance and ability to teach. Work, spend yourself, accept even sufferings and torments, in order that, through the brightness and beauty of good works, you may possess in charity what is symbolized in the Lord's white garments*"⁸.

The Brother who is called by the Lord to be like him receives the strength and the ardour of the Spirit who urges him to

⁸ Saint Augustine, Sermon 78, 6 : PL 38, 492. Quoted in VC 75

love all his brothers without exception. We must recognise the divine beauty reflected in all the casualties of life... *“the anguished faces of minors, ...”* (VC 75). We are called upon to listen to him and come to his rescue in these youths and in all those with whom he identifies. The best measure of how intensely we live up to our vocation lies in the gift of ourselves to the most in need. This kind of love sprang forth like fiery darts from the heart of John Mary de la Mennais when he said: *“Dear children, whom Jesus our Saviour kissed and blessed, come to us, stay with us, and we will be the guardians of your innocence”*⁹.

The Brother who still does not feel the infinite kindness of our heavenly Father for children has yet to sense the profound meaning of his consecrated life. He must then allow the Spirit to educate and transform him. Who knows? He may have fallen victim to idols that have seduced him. He may have unconsciously withdrawn into self-seeking. Who then can shake him up and make him aware of his blindness? Who can tell him that *“the consecrated life eloquently shows that the more one lives in Christ, the better one can serve him in others, going even to the furthest missionary outposts and facing the greatest dangers”* (VC 76)? Whoever is forever ready to go where he is sent, without dwelling at length on what he leaves behind, but making an offering of himself, finds that his vow of chastity opens up his heart and provides boundless joy. He understands that giving up everything means receiving everything.

3. Being Adult in the Faith

“The consecrated life must present to today's world examples of chastity lived by men and women who show balance, self-mastery, an enterprising spirit, and psychological and affective

⁹ John Mary de la Mennais, quoted in *Mennaisian Spirituality*, p. 68

maturity” (VC 88). This is why Vatican Council II asked not to be satisfied with warning candidates to consecrated life “*about the dangers to chastity which they may meet but they should be so instructed as to be able to undertake the celibacy which binds them to God in a way which will benefit their entire personality*” (PC 12c).

The best guarantee that we can give our fidelity to the vow of chastity does not consist in removing all external obstacles – which is simply impossible and not always desirable – but rather in strengthening the human and Christian resolve of the person. Our aim, on our journey through life, should be to acquire a true affective, psychological and spiritual maturity.

Saint Paul opposes a “childish” or “carnal” Christian behaviour to an “adult” or “perfect” behaviour. The “adult” Christian is one who has allowed the seed of his baptism to grow to maturity.

We are still spiritual children if we are not coherent in our faith. We may speak well and have clear notions on a number of subjects without living up to our fine statements. Our faith may consist of fine intellectual constructs which have no impact in our life. “*For since there is still jealousy and dissension among you, are you not influenced by the flesh and behaving like unregenerate people*” (1 Co 3, 3)? For Paul, men according to the flesh are those who entertain rivalries and jealousies. They are led by the “flesh” and not by the “Spirit”.

Saint Paul suggests that the spiritual child is incapable of understanding the wisdom of God whose secrets are revealed “neither by flesh nor by blood”, but by God himself. Only humility well understood, sign of spiritual maturity, can grant this wisdom. Simple living, listening and respect, compassion, joyous acceptance of qualities and successes of others testify to this maturity. These are the signs of an other-centered person, of a person for others. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, prisoner in the concen-

tration camp of Buchenwald, Christ was a “man-for-others”. This was his definition of choice for Christ. Thus, the Christian life that has reached maturity, fully in the likeness of Jesus, is an “existence-for-others”.

For Saint Paul, spiritual maturity is based of the “*firm conviction*” (Rm 14, 5) that enables one to trust in God without being carried away like “*children tossed back and forth by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching*” (Ep 4, 14). The adult Christian more readily grasps from within his personal relationships with God and His will. The adult consecrated person appreciates the beauty of his life in the heart of God and does not forever call into question his basic identity. He does not live in terms of other people’s wishes, but in terms of his life’s fundamental project of belonging to God alone. That journey to maturity is a journey to liberation.

Another criterion of spiritual maturity is the capacity to discern between right and wrong. Consistent fidelity to prayer and to charity gradually fashions mind and heart to serenely recognise what is good and pleasing to God. It is not a matter of obedience to a code of law but of docility to the inspiration of the Spirit. This inner compliance opens up to the action of God and produces untold fruits of the Spirit as Father de la Mennais suggests: “*Rely completely on the Spirit of God and never grieve him; try to discern what he wants from you; often confer with him and if uncertain as to the course of action to take, pray with renewed ardour that he be the light of your heart*” (Memorial 15).

“*Man cannot reach maturity if he is incapable of denying himself for others, if, forever a child, he incessantly considers himself the centre of the world and if he does not accept himself as he*

really is, with his failings and qualities, as neither better nor worse than others."¹⁰

How can we reach the maturity that we have just been talking about? Some answers lie in the abundant advice of our founders as well as in the Rule of Life. But even more basic than this, reading and meditating the Gospel will help forge in us the very maturity of Christ, the perfect Man.

Once again, Saint Paul shows the way: "*Whatever is true, whatever is worthy of respect, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if something is excellent or praiseworthy, think about these things*" (Ph 4, 8). It is not fashionable to talk about the virtues, and yet the Word of God commends them: "*If one loves justice, the fruits of her works are virtues, for she teaches moderation and prudence, justice and fortitude*" (Wis 8, 7).

- 'Prudence' "*is not to be confused with timidity or fear, nor with duplicity or dissimulation*" (CCC, n° 1806) It guides us by setting rule and measure in the conduct of daily affairs. "*The prudent man looks where he is going.*"
- The "just" man conducts himself with uprightness, acting not on a whim, but in terms of what he believes to be just.
- 'Fortitude' ensures firmness in difficulties and strengthens the resolve to resist temptations. It enables one to give up one's life to defend a just cause.
- The 'temperate' person "*does not follow the desires of his heart*" (Sir 5, 2). He ensures mastery of the will over instincts.

These human virtues, transformed by grace and grounded in faith, hope and charity, are sustained by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is by allowing oneself to be led by the Spirit of Christ that

¹⁰ Arnaldo Pigna, *La spiritualité des vœux*, p. 169

our life of chastity finds stability, and that inner harmony, sign of maturity, is achieved.

4. Loving God above all else: Prayer

In the words of Saint Paul, consecrated chastity is “*adherence to the Lord without distraction*” (1Co 7, 35). It can therefore be said that the charism to consecrated virginity cannot exist outside of prayer. Prayer is where the loving exchange between Christ and the one who has definitely and totally given himself up to him takes place.

To test the depth of our commitment, we must measure the truthfulness of our dialogue with God, of our relationship with him. A genuine consecrated life finds nourishment in regular, personal and authentic sharing with the Lord. “*The soul that is completely submerged in the Lord must be in a constant state of prayer that has nothing to do with the spiritual effervescence of formulas. It is an attention given to the true identity of Christ and of others, an impulse toward surpassing the human into the divine, an aspiration toward becoming attuned, before all else, to God.*”¹¹

The unique interpersonal loving relationship between the Brother and God cannot grow without a certain “familiarity” which supposes “*frequency of relations, assiduity of meetings, and intimacy of exchanges*”.¹² The married persons’ faithful love for each other and mutual self-giving are parables of the intimacy we are called upon to have with God. They help us develop with Christ relationships that strengthen bonds and foster a common spirit, the same feelings and fellowship in love. They remind us that we can be intimate without words while seeking the benefit of the loved one. “*Arise, my darling; My beautiful one, come away*

¹¹ Arnaldo Pigna, *La Spiritualité des vœux*, p. 167

¹² *Ibid.*

with me!... My lover is mine and I am his » (S of S 2, 10; 16). If we do not pray in that spirit, our love for God dampens. “The celibate by vocation, who severs the interpersonal relationships with God, is on the brink of losing his celibacy” (OE 75). In the words of Paul VI: “Faithfulness to prayer or its abandonment are the test of the vitality or decadence of the religious life” (ET 42).

The charism to consecrated virginity must rely on assistance from God and not on our own strength. It cannot grow into a fine tree bearing nice fruits if the Lord is not the head-gardener. This gift can only be received by those who welcome it, and more so by those who ask and ardently wish for it. Our Rule of Life stipulates wisely that we should ask “*with humility and perseverance for the grace of fidelity*” (D 41).

We should give great care to the quality of our prayer: the community context, the beauty of our place of prayer, the care given to its preparation, all of that is important and should receive our attention. However, the decision to prepare for it and the care given to its immediate preparation are necessary preliminaries to a true prayer. In a life “eaten up” by numerous activities, personal commitment to prayer must remain a priority for each Brother. It is the spiritual nourishment which spirit, mind and heart need in the midst of “the tribulations of this world”. We must set aside times for God during which we attend to our own formation in the light of the Word of God and the writings of our founders. The community dimension of that “formation” is of primary importance as essential support for each Brother. Superiors of communities should foresee with care such community times of on-going formation.

5. Struggling with perseverance

“The free and generous response to this precious gift involves a difficult, sometimes painful struggle” (D 37). The Cate-

chism of the Catholic Church specifies that “*the "spiritual battle" of the Christian's new life is inseparable from the battle of prayer*” (CCC 2725).

We often react negatively to talk about ascetic living. We figure that life as it is is sufficiently constrained without looking for other restrictions. Nevertheless, even humanly speaking, man cannot reach full maturity if he cannot make choices that necessarily imply some form of self-denial. Father de la Mennais underscored the importance of obedience as mortification inherent to our consecration. He also invited the Brothers to forgo the minor necessities of life to prepare for more difficult struggles: “*Be fervent, always faithful to the Rule and strive to strengthen your interior life.*”¹³ “*To fulfil such a wonderful mission, it is necessary to have men detached from everything, ready to undertake anything and who live by faith alone.*”¹⁴ “*Be exact to do each exercise at the appointed time. The constraint that you sometimes feel in this regard is one of the best penances.*”¹⁵

Proper self-esteem will lead to a more joy-filled and more liberating endorsement of consecrated celibacy. It is necessary, indeed, to be aware of our strengths and of our weaknesses for a better appreciation of the need to adopt rules of prudence. One can be a celibate and have lost the meaning of the vow of chastity. One can be a Brother and not benefit from the treasure of graces which the vow affords. Prudence and self-restraint testify to the humility which accepts that the journey may be full of pitfalls. They also attest to the will of selling everything for the pearl of great price.

We cannot avoid asking ourselves what personal difficulties we will have to grapple with. Saint John reminds us that “*if we say we have fellowship with him and yet keep on walking in the dark-*

¹³ To Brother Hervé, 13 April, 1843

¹⁴ John Mary de la Mennais, *An Anthology Taken from His Writings*, p. 215

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 215

ness, we are lying and not practicing the truth. But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn 1, 6-7). A bit further, he draws our attention to the triple dangers which every Christian should guard against: sensual lust, enticement of the eyes and a pretentious life (cf 1 Jn 16). “*The eye is the lamp of the body. If then your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is diseased, your whole body will be full of darkness*” (Mt 6, 22-23). Our heart may hopelessly be swayed from right to left. John Mary de la Mennais warns us: “*The soul that is ceaselessly preoccupied with a profusion of external affairs and is given over to the whims of a boundless curiosity and of a measureless vanity has no power over itself.*”¹⁶

Each one must recognize what his weak points are and what needs changing in his life: habits which have enslaved him, pleasures which he cannot deny himself any longer, this attention to the “enticement of the eyes” which he may have lost, secret liaisons. With the help of a counsellor, he must decide in his heart to change a conduct, to sever a relationship, to adopt an unambiguous orientation.

Another thing which we must not forget is that, in spite of our sin, we are responsible before God of the education of young people in our schools. It behoves us to offer them the opportunity to acquire self-mastery and the ability to discern between right and wrong in a world that seeks to turn them into “consumers”. “*You are called upon to make of these children disciples of Jesus Christ.*”¹⁷ “*God had asked you to instruct me... and you left me in ignorance...*”¹⁸ We might be a little more faithful to our vow if we estimated at their full value the educational mission that has been

¹⁶ S 1, 680, quoted by Brother Yvon Deniaud in *Prier 15 jours avec Jean-Marie de la Mennais*, Nouvelle Cité

¹⁷ John Mary de la Mennais, quoted in *Mennaisian Spirituality*, p. 69

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69

entrusted to us and our responsibility, before God, toward the young people and children whom we welcome in our schools and educational centres. What example are we giving them? Does our lifestyle convey the Lord's message that we teach or are we an obstacle to his Word? These are serious questions that we cannot avoid asking ourselves.

One last reminder: we need to maintain balanced lifestyles. We cannot neglect the means that will keep us physically and morally healthy for a serene mastery of self. The Fathers of the desert who knew what is in the heart of man were aware of this as the following story shows: "*There was in the desert a hunter of wild beasts who saw Abba Anthony playing with his Brothers. He was shocked. In order to convince him that one had to condescend to the Brothers, the old man said to him: 'Fix an arrow to your bow and stretch it.' He did so. The old monk said: 'Stretch it some more,' and so did the hunter. Once more, the old abbot said: 'Continue stretching it.' The hunter replied: 'If I stretch the bow beyond its capacity, I shall break it.' The old man then told him: 'The same applies to the Lord's work. If we stretch the Brothers beyond their capacity, they will soon be broken. One must now and then condescend to their needs.'*"¹⁹ When body and soul are tired, can they still be watchful? Each one, with help from the community, must seek "*life conditions conducive to wholesome psychological balance*" (D 37) and which help achieve vigilance and peace of heart. A serious evaluation of that point will help us discern the best choices to make. There are forms of recreation that do not pacify, that do not nourish the heart and the mind and that do not relax the body. Situations vary. I cannot here enter in all the details that should be taken up in personal discernment with the help of a counsellor.

¹⁹ Jean-Claude Guy, *Paroles des anciens*, Sagesses, p. 17

6. Loving One's Brothers: Community "Virginity"

In the same way that the last document of the Congregation for Consecrated Life²⁰ speaks of "community holiness", similarly one can speak of "community virginity" in the sense that the vow of consecrated chastity is an eschatological sign for the world as to how the sons of the resurrection must live together. One does not commit oneself to this vow without an equal commitment to a genuine love towards one's brothers and towards all. One of the most important criteria as to how we live the vow of chastity is the way we live in the fraternal community.

The Rule of Life tells us that Brothers are called "*to live together in genuine fraternal love, characterized by thoughtfulness, mutual trust and unobtrusive concern for others*", adding that "*a united community offers the convincing witness of a group of men whom vowed chastity has neither depressed nor frustrated, but has enriched and fulfilled*" (D 40). Without expanding on what has been said in another circular, let us recall that we have a responsibility as religious Brothers to witness to fraternal love.

How can we understand that men and women who have committed themselves to living as consecrated celibates for the love of Christ not be able to live together a fellowship nourished by the Word and the Eucharist, joyously sharing the same faith, partaking the same self-giving and being animated by the same charism? Consecrated chastity is a vocation to love, a call to brotherhood. It is not the Brother on his own who proclaims and anticipates this new way of loving in Christ, it is the community.

Of course, community life also has its times of difficulties and of tribulations. Far from discouraging us, the difficulties we

²⁰ *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, Instruction of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life,

meet, if accepted serenely, are opportunities to love in truth. The community ought to sustain Brothers in times of trial or of weariness. This is when our love should grow noble, strong and other-centred. Community life results from the commitment of all its members as loving adults who give of themselves freely without expecting anything in return. In the words of a young religious, *“fraternal life gives me sustenance and calls me to greater heights, beyond appearances. It is very demanding and requires self-control. My relationships with others depend to a large extent on how well I relate to myself. Others help me know myself for I cannot be fully myself in the absence of others.”*²¹

Our vow of chastity unites us intimately to Jesus as to a Friend, a Brother and a Spouse. He never lets us down but he wishes to purify our love. Spells of aridity are times of blessings. Even in community, in spite of its being close-knit, we may feel lonely. Building the community comes from having experienced its uniqueness before God. It is the only way to be truly united with Christ. This “solitude” *“must be embraced because it is a necessary component of consecrated love of God”*²². This may scare us because we shun the desert and silence. And yet, when we live in the dryness of the desert, God is always there, walking by our side. Better still, he carries us. No fecundity exists without this aloneness received as the gift of the preferential presence of God which alone can give the ability to build the community on the solid foundation of the Love which the Holy Spirit gives.

7. Engaging in Multiple Human Relationships

We have not chosen consecrated celibacy to keep aloof of normal relationships. It is most probably just the opposite that

²¹ Quoted by Nicole Jeammet, in *Le Célibat pour Dieu, Une autre manière de créer des liens*, p. 233, Cerf. 2009

²² Yves Raguin, *Célibat pour notre temps*, p. 55

takes place. Our religious apostolic life in education and teaching makes for contacts and meetings. Father de la Mennais, who was very much aware of this, invited Brothers to prudence, but he saw these relations, these “essential bonds” in the light of our commitment in schools at the service of young people. Our vow of chastity incites us to greater and healthier love. We must love our neighbour as ourselves, bearing in mind that *“half of our neighbours are persons of the opposite sex!”*²³

It is a matter for the religious of identifying what constitutes “normalcy” in his relationships with people around him. Can he, for instance, entertain relationships with a person when they become intimate to the point of a preferential friendship that leads to a “communion” of souls?

Such a question should lead to other questions: What are you looking for in this friendship? Is this a way of overcoming difficulties when you cannot be comforted, listen to and understood in the community? Is this a friendship that will in no way subdue your love of God in consecrated celibacy but will help you grow more mature?

In reality, it is always best to set landmarks before such relationships are entered into. Once the heart is committed, justifying a course of action may be more appealing than discerning alternatives. The fact that we carry the gift of virginity in earthen vessels should incite us to prudence. For us, as consecrated persons, God is our friend. He is our reference, and if we identify with him, our relationships with others will be unambiguous. Using this as a starting point, we may realise that everything else that might be said about the beauty of a man-woman relationship at the heart of consecrated life could be tainted with make-believe. *“I don’t think that living chastity is to suggest or to engage imaginatively in an adventure of some sort... I have come to realise that if friendships*

²³ Arnaldo Pigna, *La spiritualité des vœux*, p. 174

were to endure, everything had to be aboveboard. Thus, with a woman who could have had with me a slightly too important relationship... I had to distance myself more than with others... because it was not possible, it would have compromised even our friendship," recalls a young priest.²⁴

A genuine relationship with the people around us must start from our relationship with God. One must feel firmly grounded in Jesus without deluding ourselves. Our hearts may be so troubled at times that our reason strays and leads no more. *"The test of our acquaintance with God-who-is-Love, the true One, the God of revelation, is our experience of crucified Love, a self-giving Love that expects nothing in return, that does not seek to be understood, welcomed and liberated from solitude."*²⁵ Celibacy for the Lord demands our denying ourselves interpersonal relationships that can become ambiguous. We must allow God to be our prime guest. We run the risk of wishing to fill the gap of a loneliness that sometimes weighs upon us. The place reserved for God may then be occupied by someone else. Consecrated celibacy is a cross which, perhaps more than any other, makes us share in the solitude of Jesus at Gethsemane. *"When our emotional equilibrium depends on meeting someone, on a phone call, on a letter... celibacy is no more what it should be 'for the sake of the Kingdom'... Without self-denial, there is no real poverty and there is no real virginity!"*²⁶

The road to holiness – John Mary de la Mennais ceaselessly reminded us of this – means walking in the footsteps of Christ, on the way of the cross. Experiencing the love of Christ implies a readiness to let go of absolutely everything. Like Saint Paul, one must consider everything like "rubbish" in order to gain Christ. If we are really and truly detached from everything, he will provide

²⁴ Quoted by Nicole Jeammet, *Ibid.* p. 211

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 175

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 180

genuine friendships which will never run the risk of “taking away” from the Lord what is his!

8. Accepting One’s Imperfection

The previous pages may give some the impression that these teachings are a little too difficult to put into practice, perhaps even “angelical” in the sense that they do not take into account human nature and the society in which we live.

True, one could go along with this and say that the friendship with God referred to here cannot strictly be compared with the love between a man and a woman. We remain men naturally attracted to women with a view to total communion in marriage. This is why loneliness is inevitable. Our bodies and our hearts are bound to feel a certain frustration, for some stronger than for others, and at some periods in our life more than at others.

Nevertheless, *“the spiritual abundance received by the one who has been called shines forth in his body to the extent of lessening the feeling of frustration and of increasing an experience of fullness for the whole person. Natural instincts do not die out, but they start giving way to new impulses coming from the Holy Spirit.”* (SC 59). In our life as Brothers, God must be seen as Someone who can fill our heart, for our heart is in need of true love. We all need to be loved. God gives us this love. This does not concern the will alone but all the potentialities of our human heart. We are people of flesh and bones. God must then truly move our body and our heart. He “consoles” us. He is *“the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles”* (2 Co 1, 3-4). Is this not what Jesus did when he healed the lepers, caused the lame to walk and gave sight to the blind? While he moved the depths of the heart and awakened the faith, he healed the bodies and gave fullness of joy and of well-being which no one

else could give. Can he not do the same for those whom he has called to belong to him in a more intimate and unique way?

It is not necessary then to belong to the category of great mystics to engage in consecrated celibacy in a productive way. The interior transformation of the person, the perception of the love of God acting and transforming the most intimate inclinations, takes place through the grace of God and in keeping with personal commitment to the gift of self. It is obvious that one cannot lead such a life without self-denial which, under the guidance of the Spirit and endorsed by a heart that loves God, fosters the development of all the capacities of human nature.

For all that, *“it often happens that carnal instincts take over..., even when the will and the reason, that is to say, genuine love, want the opposite”*²⁷ That struggle cannot be won without prior acceptance of self. Several consecrated persons – can we say Brothers? – live their chastity through more or less occasional difficulties. They suffer internally from their transgressions but, at the same time, they wish to pursue their goal. They feel that they are called to get back on the right track in spite of failings. These Brothers know very well that God is next to them, sustaining them on the way. And off they go again. Should we blame them for falling? We should rather help them set off confidently. However, they must be true to God and to others as they open their heart to someone who can help them get back on their feet. God never walks out on us. He invites us to grow through a real commitment to a more radical asceticism and an ever more profound and intimate relationship with him.

“Do not fear the temptations that you experience involuntarily,” Father de la Mennais wrote Brother Ambrosius, *“for they are trials which God sends to test you, to keep you in humility and to teach you how much in need you are of his grace to sustain you*

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 182

and of vigilance to keep from falling. Prayer and vigilance: these are the two weapons with which you will fight back the attacks of the enemy of salvation, of this roaring lion, as the Scriptures calls him, roaming about seeking to devour us” (November 8, 1825).

FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

Henceforth, walk in the footsteps of Christ. Do not worry about yesterday. Seek first of all the Kingdom and its Justice. Let go and give yourself up and it will be given to you a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, for the measure you use will be the measure you receive.

Whether you sleep or watch, night or day, the seed sprouts and grows without your knowing how.

When you pray, do not use empty words as do the pagans who hope their abundance of words will be heard. Do not make a show of your justice before men. When you fast, do not look sullen like the hypocrites, for they make their faces unattractive so that people will see them. Put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your Father who is in secret sees the intention of your heart.

Live in simplicity and joy, the joy of the merciful, the joy of brotherly love.

Be vigilant...

Thus, from henceforth never looking back and rejoicing with infinite gratitude do not fear anticipating the dawn to praise and bless and sing Christ your Lord.

Liturgy from the profession in Taizé (France)

After reading this text, can you write what you would like to tell a young Brother who makes his first profession in the Order?

CONCLUSION

MARY, VIRGIN AND MOTHER

How well does that “garment” of light of consecrated chastity fit us, that garment which is a reflection – albeit a pale one – of that of the Woman of the Apocalypse, clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars? (Cf. Ap 12, 1) How well do we feel covered with the finery which clothes the Bride of the Beloved? *“The wedding celebration of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. She was permitted to be dressed in bright, clean, fine linen”* (Ap 19, 7-8).

The only identity we have to look for is that of belonging to God Alone. Let us become who we are, Brothers engaged by the vow of consecrated chastity as we are by the vow of evangelical

poverty and of religious obedience in this Congregation founded under the impulse of the Spirit by John Mary de la Mennais and Gabriel Deshayes. Let us put into practice what we have decided to live up to. It is useless asking ourselves other questions. We have been called. Let us live up to the call that we have received, being faithful to the Rule of Life which launched us on a journey of fellowship with Jesus. Only then shall we understand who we are in truth. So it is with the vow of chastity as with other aspects of our life as Brothers.

Mary is our model and she is our Mother. It is fitting that we end up with contemplating her. Mary, in fact, *“is the one who, from the moment of her Immaculate Conception, most perfectly reflects the divine beauty”* (VC 28). In her, virginity is closely linked to her maternity. Through her life and through her yes, she shows us the fruitfulness of virginity. Christ is born of the Virgin Mary. Mary is the Mother of Christ. The Virgin has become Mother through her yes, surrendering her life to the will of God. Her virginity is the fruit of her vocation as Mother of God.

Thus, Mary is the sign that Jesus is the Son of the Most High and that his coming in the flesh is a totally free and gratuitous gift of the Father. God gives himself to us, becomes one of us, we become his children in an entirely free and gratuitous manner. Mary is the clear sign of this since she welcomes in her, in her body, that free gift of God in her virginity. Her virginity testifies to the fact that the “fruit” which she bears comes from God and from God alone.

This is without any doubt the fundamental meaning of our consecrated life. All that we are and all that we do must find their source in God alone. This is why our motto, God Alone, appeared so vital to John Mary de la Mennais.

Mary is “*pure receptiveness to the free grace of the Most High.*”²⁸ Mary receives, in her spirit and in her body, the capacity to bear fruits which come from the Spirit of God.

She is the model of all consecrated persons, of all those who have made the vow of consecrated chastity. Indeed, we forgo the eminent benefit of marriage so that “*the Spirit may overshadow*” us and make us fruitful, capable of birthing forth Christ, especially in the hearts of young people and of children. This fruitfulness is not generated by our capacities or talents as educators; it comes from the Spirit and his free gifts. The smaller we are in his hands, the greater and stronger will his grace be. This is the paradox of the religious consecration. Our strength is in our weakness. With faith, in our weakness, the Spirit shows the might of his arm. Thus it is with Mary. Thus it is with the Church.

We are the children of Mary. She looks after us and she watches over the way we live this vow which binds us so closely to her. We often ask her to help us understand it and to live up to it with a peaceful and ardent heart. We offer her our apostolate and ask her to help us allow the Spirit to act as he wills, not as we will. We offer her our vow so she may offer it to the Father, in Christ.

May the Virgin Mary put in you her boundless love for God, she who is the beloved Spouse: “*The night watchmen found me – the ones who guard the city walls. ‘Have you seen my beloved?’ Scarcely had I passed them by when I found my beloved! I held onto him tightly and would not let him go*” (S of S 3, 3-4).

May the Mother of God help us taste the joy of total self-giving out of love! At her prayer, may the Spirit of the Lord transform us and bring forth in us fruits of salvation and of peace.

“*Shout for joy, O barren one who has not given birth! Give a joyful shout and cry out, you who have not been in labour! For the*

²⁸ A Carthusian monk, *Le bonheur d’être chaste*, p. 196

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children of the desolate one are more numerous than the children of the married woman," says the Lord (Is 54, 1).

Brother Yannick HOUSSAY, s.g.
January 1st, 2010
On the feast of Mary, Mother of God

TAKE MY YES

Mary,
Virgin of the Annunciation,
take the yes of my response
to the Lord's call.
Shelter it in your YES
for you know what difficulties I have
to say my yes so fragile, partial,
given and taken back.

May the joy and hope
that you carried to Elizabeth
yet again sing the Magnificat
on the threshold of my house.

Above all, may I be in your likeness,
a missionary on the way,
with few resources,
but full of your Son,
He who makes the children of the Kingdom
to leap for joy.

May you,
love-filled handmaid,
help me serve humbly and faithfully
unto the cross,
so that I may let your Son save me,
He who is my wisdom and my justice,
my holiness and my liberty.

Look after me on the journey
that leads to the feast of Love.²⁹

²⁹ Giovanni Maria Bigotto, fms, *Marie des Évangiles*.