

We are PILGRIMS

guided by « the spirit of our Father »

Brother Yannick Houssay
Superior General

BROTHERS OF CHRISTIAN INSTRUCTION

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God Alone



*"I shall instruct you
and teach you the way to go;
I shall not take
my eyes off you." (Ps 32, 8)*

INTRODUCTION

From the very first pages, the text of the 2012 General Chapter challenges us: *“Whatever his age, the Brother hears the voice of the Lord who spurs him on, calls him by his name and sends him forth (cf. D 19). To answer this personal call, the Brother gives much attention to encounters with the Lord in his Word, in the Eucharist, in personal prayer, in the persons and events of his life.”*¹ If this first point of the General Chapter is the briefest, it is nonetheless the most fundamental. This is why I would like to return to it in this circular letter.

In the report sent to the capitulants before the General Chapter, a few basic principles concerning our spiritual life were underscored. Here are a few excerpts:

“The Brother is a person who follows Christ and who is sent forth by him. All of his actions are both spiritual and apostolic for it is the Spirit who is at work in him. Every moment of our

¹ 2012 General Chapter, p. 9

existence, we praise God, we intercede for our brothers, we ask for forgiveness, we worship, we listen to the Spirit, we love and we evangelise through education, we serve our brothers. It is the Spirit within us who prays, acts, loves, evangelises, educates and serves.

This apostolic Mennaisian spirituality takes on specific hues through Mennaisian "icons": being guardian angels to young people, being images of Christ who welcomes and blesses children, being Jesus who does the will of his Father through total obedience onto the cross, etc.

It is a life experience and not primarily a discourse. We often talk about the problem of the unity of life as a continual challenge, a state never achieved. Here, we are confronted with the intimate experience of each Brother.... Searching a Brother's identity must be a path that leads to the unification of our being. This relies on our inner listening to the Spirit ... otherwise we risk running out of breath, of emptying ourselves internally and of losing the love of our vocation.

The real issue is that of spiritual, human, apostolic, Mennaisian growth...

We must meet the challenge of the growth of the spiritual and apostolic life of each Brother, paying attention to the specific needs of each "age of the spiritual life."

*What place does the Word of God hold in our lives? Is it read, meditated, studied as it should be through the **Lectio divina**? Has each community, or better yet, each Brother access to the Bible or to a Missal that allows him each day to read and meditate on the Word?*

*As for the revision of life, or **Lectio vitae**, we cannot underestimate its importance for our religious life. How can we progress in the work of the Lord if we do not take the time, each day, to look at one's life in the light of the Spirit? "*

It's been two years since the Chapter was held. But the challenge of lifelong learning in our Institute remains. Let us remember what John Paul II wrote in *Vita Consecrata*: *"The primary objective of the formation process is to prepare people for the total consecration of themselves to God in the following of Christ, at the service of the Church's mission."* This undertaking must prepare one *"to say 'yes' to the Lord's call by taking personal responsibility for maturing in one's vocation"*. This formation should therefore *"have a profound effect on individuals, so that their every attitude and action... will show that they belong completely and joyfully to God."* In the final analysis, *"formation is a path of gradual identification with the attitude of Christ towards the Father."* (VC 65) *"At no stage of life can people feel so secure and committed that they do not need to give careful attention to ensuring perseverance in faithfulness; just as there is no age at which a person has completely achieved maturity."* (VC 69)

In this excerpt from *Vita Consecrata*, let us underscore the following expressions: undertaking, maturing in one's vocation, gradual identification with the attitude of Christ. They express, each in its own way, that spiritual life is a work in progress and that we are pilgrims journeying towards the holiness to which we are called. There is, on the one hand, a call, and on the other, our personal and community response that our fragility and sin often thwart.

This journey takes shape at the heart of a "family" that has received from the Spirit gifts that are today shared by all its members. Mennaisian spirituality, somehow, is the matrix of our own spiritual maturation, of our growing up in Christ. This pilgrimage which is common to all Christians takes for us, therefore, a particular coloration that translates in an experience of fellowship and can be seen in the figures of our founders and of the first Brothers.

In the first chapter, we shall compare the spiritual life to a journey on which, far from wandering, we walk and are drawn to a goal that we have set for ourselves. The second chapter will help us to understand that to guide us on the way, we have a "compass" which is the very light of the Spirit, the "star" that always precedes us.

The last two chapters offer us the opportunity to see how our spiritual life is marked by the charism of our Institute. We are invited - each will be responsible for his own answer - to recognize the beauty of the work of the Spirit in us, united to all those who recognize the same inspiration, the same charism.

On the way, we will understand better that, if 'God alone' can make us saints, he still wants us to take a clear decision. This work is his; it is also ours. This was the path taken by all the saints. The young Roncalli - the future Pope John XXIII - shows us the example. When he was 21, he wrote this resolution: "God wants me to be holy without restrictions, and so must I be."

We are PILGRIMS

The journey of our life can be compared to a pilgrimage. In a world where it is difficult to find silence and peace and where artificial light tarnishes the beauty of a star-lit night, many are drawn by the experience of a walk that distances them from noise and agitation and brings them inner peace of heart. *“We may say that the spiritual life, understood as life in Christ or life according to the Spirit, presents itself as a path of increasing faithfulness, on which the consecrated person is guided by the Spirit and configured by him to Christ, in full communion of love and service in the Church.”* (VC 93) In one of his morning homilies Pope Francis adds: *“We are travelers, but not strays. We are on the road, but we know where we are going! We are pilgrims, not vagabonds!”* We walk towards a horizon of light.

This pilgrimage reminds us of our history. Past events of our personal lives become closer and appear to us as founding events. We understand better, then, the long journey that is our life. Having a horizon ahead of us, a road to travel by, reminds us of the progress already made, what it taught us

about ourselves, about others and about the world, about God too. The passing of time appears to us as a fundamental experience. While walking, we experience time as a school of life. There is a before and an after. We cannot go back. We move forward, drawn to a goal that seeks the full adhesion of the heart.

“Time is greater than space,” Pope Francis writes. “This principle enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans... Giving priority to space means madly attempting to keep everything together in the present... Giving priority to time means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces.” This is what provides thrust forward. Further on, the Pope has this brilliant linkage with the work of the Spirit in the world: “The parable of the weeds among the wheat (cf. Mt 13:24-30) graphically illustrates an important aspect of evangelization: the enemy can intrude upon the kingdom and sow harm, but ultimately he is defeated by the goodness of the wheat.”²

Giving priority to time is speaking about life in terms of roads to travel by, of departures and of constantly new horizons. The life path we travel, made up of comings and goings, deviations and new beginnings, calls for patience and invites us to acknowledge the Spirit who guides us. We receive from him, when we need it, the light that enlightens us. We then learn the perseverance of the pilgrim: it is necessary to walk, even at night, until, once again, the day seems like a new

² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 222-225

beginning. *"Very simply, to live is a constant departure. Our entire existence, including our death, is our slow birth, made up of crises and heartrending experiences."*³

Giving priority to time is also to be convinced that at each new stage there are important passages but that these are never final. The pilgrim knows he can go the wrong route, but that nothing is lost for all that. Helped by companions or good guides, he can find his way again. He also discovers that when a difficult stretch has been crossed, the horizon widens and the world is seen with new eyes. Although additional steps may alert him to events that lie ahead, he resumes walking with courage and hope, as other perspectives are offered to him. He knows that stepping back is not possible if he does not wish to abandon the project he has set for himself and which, deep within, is a call to excellence.

In this way our spiritual life unfolds: a journey that knows no rest but constantly opens up to a future as long as we do not give up. If life becomes monotonous and boring, if it loses its vitality, its meaning, its strength, it is probably a sign that we have lost the direction. We have become wanderers; we are no longer pilgrims. Our gaze strays from the goal we have set for ourselves. We have been seduced by mirage-like fleeting pleasures. We must then shake ourselves up and go back to walking, waking the slumberer who has fallen asleep by the wayside, allowing his companions to press on ahead.

The means to achieve this awakening are plenty, but we must accept not immediately to see the fruits of our efforts. Time and patience teach us not to be discouraged at the first

³ Bernard Rey, *L'engagement de la foi*, Christus, no. 173, p. 25

test. We must constantly set off on the way, patiently waiting for the fruit of our labours. We will have learned, along the way, that it is necessary more and more to let go of self.

The Word of God abundantly uses the image of the road, of the way. The prophet Micah, for instance, reminds the Chosen People what the Lord expects of them: *“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”* (Micah 6, 8) In addition, the psalms magnify *“the perfect way”* (cf. Ps 101), the *“way of the righteous”* that the Lord knows and that diverts from the *“way of the wicked”* (Psalm 1).

The God of Israel is a God who calls and leads his people on challenging and bewildering paths. Abraham must leave his land for a foreign land. The Chosen People, guided by God, goes through the desert by a long and difficult path that leads to the Promised Land. The path that the Lord asks his people to borrow is a difficult one of *“ongoing formation”*. This path of growth will allow them to become a people who praises God and who witnesses to his love for all. Yes, take this *“road and remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart...”* (Dt 8, 2-3).

In the New Testament, early Christianity is called *“the Way”* (Acts 9: 2), the way which allows one to become son in the Son, who was manifested to us as *“the Way!”* *“Follow the way of love, following the example of Christ who loved you,”* urges St. Paul (Eph 5, 2). Jesus calls his disciples to walk in his footsteps. He himself had no stone to lay his head, but he walked the roads of Galilee, proclaiming the coming Kingdom, healing the sick and casting out demons. Those who became his disciples

were called to follow him and to do as he did. "The Way", therefore, represents the manner of being a Christian. For Saint Paul, it is not only a question of walking the road, but of running the course! This thrust towards a future that belongs to God is imperative. *"Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us"* (Ph 3, 13-14).

We cannot therefore speak of a spiritual journey, or simply of a spiritual life as something static that is learned once and for all. It is a matter of training ourselves to walk humbly with God, all our life, to bring healing like him, to talk like him and to live like him. This is truly a companionship. He who has called us wants to walk with us, as he did with the Pilgrims at Emmaus. He wants to speak to us, to teach us and make us grow. He adopts our pace to invite us, little by little, to adopt his own, not only for a few days or months, but for a lifetime. So our life with him is a constant tension that never slackens. *"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on the model of our faith, which leads to perfection, Jesus"* (Heb, 1-2).

Have you not noticed that every morning at the office, we summarize all of this in the invitational psalm (Ps 94) that we pray together: *"Come.... come to him with thanksgiving ..."* So do not stand still, you who have just woken up to a new day, go and walk to meet your God; he awaits. We resume our march at dawn, without dragging our feet, because time presses on... *"We are the people whom he leads, the flock guided by his hand,"* we sing in the same psalm. *"Now, will you listen to his word?"* Will you still look like your fathers, walking in the

desert, who closed their heart and tempted God? Will you let your heart wander and lose your way? If you want to *“enter into his rest,”* in the land he promised you, do not be like the people who *“did not know his ways”*.

Our spiritual life consists in walking with Jesus, humbly, day after day. We are not followers of Christ so as to find rest. Our Master is always at work with his Father. By a slow and patient process, our pilgrimage will help us acquire the feelings that are in Christ, the love of a son for the Father and an immense affection for our brothers. This is not a stroll, it's a race. But we are clothed with the Spirit who makes us all athletes ready to take the tests that will shape us more and more in the image of Christ.

The question we can now ask ourselves is: “Are we really living our spiritual life as a road to follow, as a race to win?” There are different stages in a race. In the novitiate, the really committed heart “gives wings” and strength to the young man who wants to become a Brother. He has the impression of running, of flying toward the goal. The required efforts have a clear meaning for him and he forges ahead with enthusiasm.

Later, there comes a time when disappointment sets in *“owing to poor results”*. Perhaps had we confused *“absolute selflessness with absolute results”* (VC 70)? We were perhaps more committed to the success of our apostolic action than to the gift of ourselves for the Kingdom. This is the time of purification of our intentions. We have become aware that we walk in the footsteps of the Lord, not because we feel personal satisfaction, or because all around us are well disposed and are totally given, and that there is perfect agreement among ourselves regarding the objectives. No, we walk behind Christ

because he is who he is; he called us and he loves us. Perhaps at times, we do not see him anymore; it is as if he were absent. We continue on the journey, however, because we know - faith tells us - that this is the path which he called us to follow. We do feel this, inwardly, as a certainty. It is as if we were running on a track at night. The oil that we have in store, like the "wise virgins", allows us to maintain sufficient internal light to proceed with confidence, waiting for the Bridegroom to show himself again. This inner light is the only marker that persists.

Fatigue may also be setting in. "We have been such a long time at your service, Lord, and you haven't given us anything..." We are like the elder son of the father in the parable. We complain when we live by the Father's largesse every day without realizing it. We are jealous of others who seem to receive extraordinary graces. And we, nothing! Then, indeed, comes the disappointment and the temptation to give up, to "rest" and to "distract" ourselves, thinking about something else. And little by little, we abandon the Gospel mentality to adopt a "worldly" mentality, a danger so often denounced by Pope Francis.

On the contrary, if, despite the darkness, we continue to walk, we avoid falling into individualism, resistance or compromise. We then discover that we are called to something beyond ourselves, and that only the Lord can make our life successful. Purified, made modest and humble, allowing the work of God and not our work to show forth, open and welcoming to others, to strangers, we then rejoice at what God is doing, at what others accomplish and not primarily at what we do.

However, we know from experience that inner detachment does not come easily. This is a hard fight that takes time and perseverance. And on the journey, defeats and victories have convinced us that if we had been alone, we would not have persevered. We have made it, also, thanks to our Brothers. They certainly are not perfect, but they are our brothers, and thanks to them, we persevere on our pilgrimage.

Let's return to the image of the walker. When we see early morning hikers setting off to climb a mountain, we may say: Why are they up so early since they have all day ahead of them. Why don't they wait for the sun to rise? They get tired in the morning when they have all the time in the world. But no! To be sure to make it early at the top in order to take full advantage of the climb, they must set off at dawn.

So it is with our walk in the footsteps of Christ. Every morning, we experience getting up early to ensure we are not late for the rendezvous with the Bridegroom who invites us to meet him with our lamps well lit. Every day, we wake up with this goal in mind: to continue our journey in the footsteps of Christ, climbing higher today than yesterday. Such is the happy decision, the burning love within us, day and night, awake or sleeping. Whatever the stage we are at, we must always have that desire to be men who stand tall and offer themselves to God alone. Even if the night of the heart prevents us from seeing the sun of God, we must challenge ourselves onwards. It has been said that success belongs to those who get up early. "The early bird..." If this is true from a human standpoint, it is also true in terms of our spiritual life.

We have to rediscover the meaning of the morning prayer as the time of awakening to what the Spirit is telling us in the

silence of a quiet and personal encounter, the time also when the bread is given for the day, the bread of the Word and of the Body of Jesus, if we are so favoured as to participate in the Eucharist in the morning. We will then be like Elijah whose experience I invite you to reread in the first Book of Kings (19, 1-8):

"Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I don't make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time!" When he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, "It is enough. Now, O Yahweh, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers." He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, an angel touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat!" He looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on the coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of Yahweh came again the second time, and touched him, and said, "Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you." He arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the Mount of God."

Elijah wants to do what God wants. He is ardent. He has the youthful enthusiasm of the heart for his Lord. But now his life is in danger. He cannot tolerate this. He seeks to save his life! He runs away, depressed! He comes to wish he were dead; life has no meaning to him. He thinks he is misunderstood; he refuses to fight. This is when the angel of the Lord appears to him. What does he bring him? Bread and water for the road, a long

road, a road meant for the people that God saves. This food will allow him to hear the word that God speaks to him, and especially give him strength to put it into practice. He has no fear. He leaves in hope.

*“Faith is not an answer to a fleeting strong emotion: it makes for commitment in a long and oftentimes difficult adventure which does not do away with trials and dark nights.”*⁴

The Rule of Life tells us: *“At the moment of his profession, the Brother, drawn by an unshakable hope, takes hold of his entire life with all its unforeseeable vicissitudes and places it as a spiritual sacrifice in God's almighty hand. The dynamic impact of that fleeting act, sustained by grace, endures as a permanently willed oblation despite superficial variations in his dispositions.”* (D 24) Let us not listen to the voice of fatigue or of discouragement. *“Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the Word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervour dies out,”*⁵ writes Pope Francis. Let us say it again: every morning upon awakening, we must be willing to begin with what is vital if we wish to avoid falling into discouragement and tepidity. We need to eat the bread of the Word that gives deep joy and peace to our hearts; we must take the food of the Body and Blood of Jesus and receive the strength of his soul and the light of his spirit. Every morning, thus fed, we open ourselves up to the vast field of the Lord to which we are sent, interceding for those who await our presence and word, embracing this people who thirsts. On the pilgrimage of our

⁴ Bernard Rey, op. cit., p. 31

⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium*, no 262

spiritual life, God must always be present in our mind and in our heart, as must also be present to our mind and heart the men, women and especially children and young people who walk with us.

Finally, to conclude this first point, let us remember the importance of our personal decision. Many were the disciples who left and abandoned the Master as soon as the road appeared too stressful. To go down the road, to be enduring pilgrims, we have to decide firmly, once, twice..., every day of our life. I here repeat the example of John XXIII. At 15, he had taken four resolutions: *“Union with Jesus, meditation in my heart, praying the rosary, be fully aware of all my decisions.”* These clear and accurate decisions were accompanied by unbounded confidence in Providence. He said, *“God is everything, I am nothing, and that's enough for me today.”* His holiness lies in evangelical obedience to the Lord and the simplicity of life. He tried to counter concern with humour. *“One night I dreamed that my guardian angel told me: ‘Angelo, do not take yourself so seriously!’ ”* he said one day. Decisiveness, right intention, simplicity of life, sense of humour about oneself, such were the fundamental decisions of a life fully given to God.

The HOLY SPIRIT is our GUIDE

The Incarnation of the Son has taken place in this real world of ours. Spiritual life, which consists in being open to his Spirit is, therefore, a real – not a virtual -- dimension of our existence. It can only be lived at the heart of our relationships and of our human activities as well as at the heart of our decisions and daily queries. It is not extraneous to us as if we had to look for it outside of ourselves and then make it part of our life. It is the fruit of the action of the Spirit whom we receive freely in the innermost recesses of ourselves. A true spiritual life unifies our life and frees us from the stress of dispersal.

To help us understand this mystery and try to better understand how to acquire this profound unification of being, we will again listen to the Word of God. It teaches us to enter into life as on a pilgrimage, a pilgrimage of the heart. The heart here does not only refer to our emotional life and sensitivity. It takes on a much broader and more inclusive meaning. In the Bible, the heart rather evokes all the activities of the mind, the emotions, but also the intelligence, intuition, the realm of the

unconscious, etc. We could also speak of our spirit or of our soul to refer to the internal coherence of the human being. It goes without saying that it is in this center that the unification of our being takes place. It is therefore important to occupy that center if we wish to live with ourselves and reach out to the Spirit of God who makes his abode within us and puts order in our inner house, chasing away every spirit that could sow confusion in it.

The prayer of the psalms has accustomed us to enter into this language. The Lord probes the *"hearts and minds"* (Ps 7, 10). He is *"the savior of the human heart"* (Ps 7, 11). While *"lying lips"* express the *"language of a double heart"* (Ps 12, 3), *"upright hearts behold his face"* (Ps 11: 7). The heart of man can be right or wrong, it can be opened to the truth or closed to what is right. Job said of his persecutors that God had *"closed their heart to knowledge"* (Job 17, 4). Again, *"knowledge"* does not refer to the rational intelligence; its meaning is broader than that. It is the idea of insight, clarity and discernment. The intelligence of the heart in the Bible often refers to the wisdom of one who does what God wants. To close one's heart to knowledge, in this sense, is refusing to do the will of God.

In the book of Proverbs we also read: *"In the heart of the intelligent wisdom abides"* (Prov. 14, 33), *"An intelligent heart seeks knowledge"* (Proverbs 15: 14). *"The intelligent heart acquires knowledge"* (Proverbs 18: 15). Intelligence, again, does not express only brain activity or reasoning intelligence; *"The intention of the human heart is like water far below the surface, but the man of intelligence draws it forth"* (Pr 20, 5).⁶ In

⁶ Cf *Les Symboles bibliques*, Maurice Cocagnac, éditions du Cerf, p. 234

contrast, the disorder of the heart can bring bitterness and sourness. Sin then darkens the intelligence. Only God can deliver the heart and restore light. It can then rejoice: *"Even at night my heart instructs me, my heart exults, my heart rejoices,"* proclaims the psalmist (Ps 16, 7, 9).

The Gospel also tells us that unity of life resides in the heart. It confirms that the greatest commandment is: *"Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength"* (Dt 6, 4-5). It then relates it to the love of neighbor to express the fundamental unity of these two aspects of the same way: *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* (Mk 12, 31). The unified heart is a righteous heart that knows that these two "commandments" are but one. With the psalms we sing this praise: *"The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart"* (Ps 19, 9). *"Rejoice in the Lord, exult, you just; rejoice, all you upright of hearts"* (Ps 32, 11).⁷

For Saint Paul, the heart is the abode of Christ and of the Spirit: *"Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father'."* (Gal 4: 6). It is because of this transformation of our heart through faith in Christ and by the power of the Spirit that we are able to do what pleases the Father. *"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws"*

⁷ Ibid. p. 238

(Ezekiel 36: 25-27).

In Saint Paul, writes F. Prat (sj), *"the heart is the center of all sentient, intellectual and moral life, the universal seat of the affections and passions, of remembrance and remorse, of joy and sadness, of holy resolutions and perverse desires, the channel of all emanations of the Holy Spirit, the sanctuary of conscience where are engraved in indelible characters the tables of the natural law, and where no gaze penetrates except the eye of God. Truth enlightens it, infidelity blinds it, impenitence hardens it, hypocrisy falsifies it, happiness dilates it, anxiety tightens it, giving thanks rejoices it. The heart is the measure of man, the heart is man himself, and that is why God, to put a fair price on man, looks at the heart."*⁸

The transformation of our "heart" understood as the expression of our whole being, manifests itself in behavior which reveals the work of the Spirit in the depths of our being and our willingness to cooperate with him through faith. It is the work of the Spirit, but it is also ours by faith. Thus we can say with Saint Paul: *"I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."* (Gal 2: 20). This is what a Brother formulated in his own way: *"The most beautiful place in the world? Being like Jesus on the cross."*⁹ He thus expressed the inner fire that the Lord had kindled within him, and the personal commitment he gave through faith and his desire to conform to Christ.

The heart is the place of dialogue between us and God. He

⁸ Prat, F. *La Théologie de saint Paul*, quoted by Gérard Therrien in : *Le discernement dans les écrits pauliniens*, éditions Gabalda, 1973

⁹ Brother Sigebert le Heiget, died in Ploërmel in 1930, aged 50. *Ménologe* Tome 1, p. 139

speaks, we listen. He beckons to us, we obey. We question, he replies. And as we journey towards the light, we interact constantly with him like the disciples of Emmaus. So if we wish to faithfully do our pilgrimage on earth, we must be able to read the signs he gives within, and thus discern whether we are on the right path. It has been said above: it is easy to lose our way and get sidetracked on other paths. How then can we follow the star that shines in our hearts and that guides our steps?

To forge ahead on the path of our lives, we must take the time to discern with particular attention to various "spirits" that speak to our "heart." Some discourage us, others put us to sleep, others numb us, and still others stimulate us and call us to walk again, to start over and over again. It is therefore very important to see clearly within and to understand how the Spirit of God reveals himself. The few personal dispositions discussed below are clear signs that God is at work and that we walk in his presence, with our weaknesses and our sin without doubt, but also with faith in his merciful love. I invite you to grasp the deep meaning of that presence at work within you so as to do a fair job of your revision of life.

1. • An attitude of joy and thanksgiving to God and to our brothers. *"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus"* (1 Th 5: 16-18). The deep peace that dwells in us and our joy, despite frustrations and failures, are the measure of the work that the Spirit accomplishes in us. Of course we must also reckon with the psychological fragility of our wounded nature. But our vulnerability does not prevent God from acting. With experience, we sense God at work when we

discover that, despite our ups and downs, we do want to do the will of God alone.

2. • A fraternal love progressing constantly and lived in a concrete way, in selfless concern for our Brother and denial of self. Having *“the same feelings that are in Christ Jesus”* (Phil 2: 5), such is the inner law written by the Spirit of Christ. Christian love is selflessness through the gift of self to others at the example of Christ who loved us and gave himself up for us. Charity is not a vague "good feeling"; it is the "high road" of a love that is patient, that is not envious, that is not puffed up, that does not seek its interest, etc. (cf. 1 Cor 13). This “high road” can only be taken as a result of the inspirational power of the Spirit of Christ. Spiritual maturity comes with a real sense of the Church and a genuine commitment to community life. It is distinguished by the quality of our personal investment in the life of our community and in the local Church. Difficulties do not discourage us; they stimulate us. “Everything remains to be done, and I want to be part of it!” This love in deed means that our heart is rooted in Christ and that we want him to act in us.

3. • An obedience of faith to our superiors and the Rule of Life, an obedience given in full freedom because it is accompanied by total consent in the depths of the heart. We want what God wants, that is all. We do our job carefully, without excessive stress or anxiety. We are free with regards to what prevents us from doing good and might turn us into slaves. We experience true inner freedom while being fully given to our brothers and young people. The opposite of this obedient attitude is what leads us to seek protection for

ourselves in order to do what we want. We are worried because we are not enough free vis-à-vis ourselves. On the pretext of defending our rights, we refuse to give up what we had offered in the generous thrust of our youth. A peaceful and joyful obedience of the heart, in deed, is the guarantee that we walk humbly with God.

4. • A life lived to the glory of God, and not to satisfy our personal tastes and interests. In fact, we seek to do only *“what pleases God, what is good”* (cf. Rom 12: 2). May God be glorified and loved, there is our happiness. Conversely, we may be tempted to give more importance to the glory received from others and be disappointed at not being “good enough” or at not being recognized to the extent of our expectations. But we are on the right track if we are more attentive to congratulate and encourage others with simplicity rather than show bitterness at not being recognised by them. *“May I fulfill my commitments in all their perfection,”* wrote a 27 year old Brother in 1916. *“May nobody care for me, may I be as forgotten as a grain of sand ... O Jesus, I but ask for peace!... Peace and boundless love, without limits!”*¹⁰ *“The tribulations are like fire; they must purify us, they should not burn us.”*¹¹ When we truly seek the glory of God, we become more confident in Providence, more indifferent to criticism and failure, and more patient vis-à-vis ourselves and others. These are signs that God is in us. We follow the star that guides us on the path of life.

¹⁰ Fr. Ignace-Marie Besnard, *Ménologe* Tome 1, p. 37

¹¹ John Mary de la Mennais, *Mémorial*, p. 110

We JOURNEY with COMPANIONS

What we have been talking about until now applies to all the baptised. We are all called to sainthood. Each one receives in his own heart a personal call from the Spirit. God does not speak in general; he speaks specifically to each and every one. He comes, knocks on the door and enters into his own. A dialogue can then begin and God speaks in a most personal way. He calls those whom he loves by their names. He hopes to be listened to and waits for a personal reply. He wishes for a life-long personal dialogue. Some lives of the saints underscore this companionship where God, little by little, fashions those whom he loves.

However personal is the spiritual journey of each one, it is lived in the Church. We journey with companions who have been seduced by the same inner light. The same God experience is at once very personal and fraternity enhancing. *“We may say that the spiritual life, understood as life in Christ or life according to the Spirit, presents itself as a path of increasing faithfulness, on which the consecrated person is*

guided by the Spirit and configured by him to Christ, in full communion of love and service in the Church. All these elements, which take shape in the different forms of the consecrated life, give rise to a specific spirituality, that is, a concrete programme of relations with God and one's surroundings, marked by specific spiritual emphases and choices of apostolate, which accentuate and represent one or another aspect of the one mystery of Christ." (VC 93) A true experience of the God of Jesus Christ makes us feel part of a church reality which, for us Brothers, is embodied in a "specific spirituality".

In recent years, works have enabled us to identify the main features of the "Mennaisian spirituality." It is not my intention here to recall its fundamental elements, but rather to suggest that this work should be done by each Brother. Some provinces have proposed various courses to help communities to enter into this process. But much remains to be done. I hereby invite each Brother to refer to existing sources¹² and pencil in hand, strive to write for himself what he perceives to be the heart of our "common mystique". It is important, in fact, that everyone be able to say in a few words what constitutes the essence of "our spirituality." It is up to each one of us to question himself and try to discern the interior dispositions that the Holy Spirit has deposited in him and that put him in profound communion with the Founders and yesterday's and today's Brothers.

Responding to God's call to become Brothers, we entered

¹² *Anthology*, Marcel Doucet; *Spirituality of a Man of Action*, Philippe Friot; *Mennaisian Spirituality*, Josu Olabarrieta and Miguel-Angel Merino; *Prier 15 jours avec Jean-Marie de la Mennais*, Yvon Deniaud; The periodical *Études mennaisiennes*, and its successor: *La Mennais Studies*, etc.

this religious family and we traveled a path that has allowed us to follow Jesus and let ourselves be shaped by him to be in his image when he welcomed children and youth and when he taught them. As we progressed and despite setbacks, we can say that we have learned to know ourselves better, to better perceive God's work in us and what he expects from us. At least, years lived in the Congregation as Brothers have given us that opportunity. Everyone must be in a position to assess how he has exploited the "talents" that he has received.

The Word of God read and meditated every day, daily fidelity to the demands of the Rule of Life, the Eucharist that nourishes us with the "daily bread", the sacrament of reconciliation periodically lived – all of these have allowed us to feel more specific calls as gifts coming from the Spirit and inviting us to take steps to open ourselves to his graces, an indifference to which we must always guard against. Along the way, we may have received the grace to discern an inner attitude triggered by an expression from the Gospel or a word from our Founder or the Rule of Life, and which was for us a source of new momentum and deep inner joy, as a "personal vocation" in the common vocation. It is the same Spirit that has given rise to the charism of our Congregation - which also includes a form of spirituality - and by which we actually live inwardly and personally. The Spirit of Christ calls us to him by way of the Congregation.

Let us go back to the image of the pilgrim with which we began our discussion. As children and young people, we walked on the road of life. People have talked to us about God. In silent prayer, the Word of God has moved us. Jesus himself has spoken to our heart through an encounter, a writing, a life

experience, and we then felt an inner joy, like a light that illuminates and indicates the direction of our journey. From there a spiritual life was born and grew. It now takes shape and different hues; it feeds on this or that word of Jesus. This is a bit how the Lord begins and continues the dialogue with us when he sees that we listen and respond to him. *"I would like to be the little spark that lights great fires wherever I go,"* writes a young Brother.

It is the grace that the Spirit gives to each one of us. Nobody is forgotten. Perhaps some are so "scatterbrained" that they do not quite hear the word which expresses itself deep in their heart. But we are all at one time or other touched by the Spirit of Jesus who makes us his imitators. Guided by an "elder" who will help us find the right path, silence and prayer are what we need the most to discern how the Spirit is at work at the heart of our own actions. *"Never once did Jesus say: 'Pray well!' However, he said: 'Pray without ceasing.' Prayer is therefore not a gem, but the jewel of your action."*¹³

Let us return to our young pilgrim who felt the Spirit speaking to him and inviting him to be closer to Jesus. When he entered the congregation, he could feel that he was going to travel with companions who had the same attractions and who sought the same realities. He discovered a family spirit.

In 1897, Brother Abel Gaudichon, shortly after being elected Superior General, wrote to the Brothers: *"One of the most effective ways we have to advance in the perfection that God requires of us is to make our own the spirit of our Founder. The*

¹³ Michel-Marie Zanotti-Sorkine, *Au diable la tiédeur*, Robert Laffont, 2012, p. 53

good Father has not abandoned us, he is still with us by the Constitutions which he bequeathed to us, by the sublime virtues which he practiced, the memory of which excites us powerfully to walk in his footsteps ... We owe him a tender and confident devotion, and let not a single day go by without addressing to him a pious invocation ... If the spirit of our Father moves us, we shall be strong because we will keep union and peace among ourselves, and we will outdo each other in piety, zeal and dedication to accomplish the work of God in the positions holy obedience entrusts to us."

To better understand what may be our "personal way of life," we need to better understand what Brother Abel called "the spirit of our Father." This spirit, we find by reading and meditating his writings and at the heart of the Rule of Life that we must constantly make our own. This takes time and patience. We have to love this moment of the coming fruit of the Spirit, like the gardener who can appreciate the slow germination of nature, and the pilgrim who loves the long journey and receives it as a gift of the Spirit.

When reading the writings specific to the Congregation, we must feel that the Spirit illumines our path, defines the path even more, and gives our heart the inner feeling of a walk that liberates and gives joy. It is important that we put in writing what is, for us, the bond of communion that we have with our Brothers, the Mennaisian route we have to follow. Each Brother of the Congregation, each Lay Mennaisian should be able, in a few words, to plot the main course of his journey in the footsteps of Christ, under the inspiration of the Spirit and in communion with all the companions who are called upon to make up his family.

This is accompanied by a greater and a more intimate love of our Founders and of our religious family. Loving them is a source of inspiration for our spiritual life as Brothers. It is that inner love which tests the authenticity of our walk in the footsteps of Jesus according to our charism. We will also feel that if the theoretical definition of the Mennaisian spirituality is important, the personal way of living it in communion with the Brothers and Lay Mennaisian Family is even more important. It is my deepest wish that each Brother write in his own words the story of his hardworking and cheerful life's offering, that journey of his life in the Spirit, according to "the spirit of our Father."

Guided by the “SPIRIT of our FATHER”

As I noted above, a few books have been written with the aim of making a real synthesis of our "spirituality". Here, I simply want to point out some of our founding Father's main emphases that we can identify in his numerous letters of advice to the Brothers. I do not wish to make a synthesis of the "Mennaisian spirituality." My purpose is only to highlight some elements among those we rely on for our spiritual life to truly be a path of growth.

John Mary de la Mennais wanted his Brothers to become saints. The advice presented here is already known; it could be formulated differently and other elements could be identified. The important thing is to grasp that by following our Father's advice, we follow more and more the way that the Holy Spirit invites us to take.

1. “Take Jesus for model in everything.”

John Mary de la Mennais wrote to the Daughters of

Providence (1844): *"I received with thanks your New Year wishes, and in return I offer you a bouquet: it is made up of the flowers of humility, of simplicity, of love of poverty and of obedience ... They will keep all their beauty as long as you take the best care of them and keep away all that might alter their splendour. So, do not look for personal satisfaction in the least of things; have no attachment whatsoever to your own will; take Jesus for model in everything; love the deprivation of his crib, the swaddling clothes of his cradle, the thorns of his crown, the gall of his chalice, and the wood of his cross."*

Father de la Mennais was inviting the Sisters to offer their heart to Christ and him alone, and to seek to be in his image through the practice of humility, simplicity, poverty and obedience. Equally, he asked the Brothers to gaze upon the cross of Christ so as to love as he loved. To one Brother he asked: *"Is it too much to ask you to put yourself out for him?"*¹⁴

This invitation is still valid today. Our life in the Spirit consists in taking Christ as a model, and as a result, to "love" his cross, the deprivation of the crib, etc. *"Take Jesus Christ as your model, love ... the wood of the cross."* That's the whole question. It is a call to love. We cannot really love as Jesus did if we do not love his cross. Love of the cross gives strength and courage. Contemplating it provides healing for the soul, the mind and the body. Nobody can understand this language if he has not had the experience of being loved by God, an experience that is a gift of the Spirit which he fosters in the heart of his disciples.

It is without any doubt that kind of experience which

¹⁴ To Brother Hippolyte Morin, March 31, 1829

Brother Ignace-Marie Besnard¹⁵ had when he wrote in his diary: *“O Jesus, I only ask for peace!... May I fulfill my commitments in all their perfection. May nobody care for me, may I be trampled underfoot, may I be as forgotten as a grain of sand ... I offer myself to you, my Beloved, so that you may perfectly accomplish in me your holy will, without resistance from any creature.”*

This intimate union with Jesus Christ is the desire of the soul. Wanting to be holy means having personally experienced the flame of the love of Christ. Although several Brothers live this secretly, for lack of guidance they often do not discern the inner path that the Lord opens up for them. We may sometimes feel that our spiritual life is hard and dry, when in fact the Spirit teaches us to love more surely. The intelligence of our heart must learn to be illuminated by a light that comes from elsewhere. It is faith in Christ the Saviour, love of his cross, listening to his word that enlighten our minds and arouse the enthusiasm of a will liberated from its shackles.

To love Jesus, we must not give heed to the contradictory feelings within us, but whether it be day or night, we must stand before his cross, in silence, allowing him to love us and offer ourselves fully to him. Thus, we will let ourselves be transformed, discarding depressing thoughts, enlivening in us the spirit of faith through meditation and prayer, and little by little, the feelings that are in Christ Jesus, his way of seeing, of listening, of speaking will embed themselves into us and change us.

¹⁵ Died in La Prairie, January 4, 1922, aged 33 – Ménologe Tome 1, p. 32

2. ***“Act with simplicity and freedom of spirit.”***

Simplicity and freedom of spirit are two attitudes that John Mary de la Mennais tried to instill into the Brothers. *“Have no attachment to your own will ...,”* we read above. He insisted very much indeed on the need for peace of heart and simplicity of life; he invited them to rely fully on Providence. He urged all to a truly holy life that denies its own feelings and is free of all self-love. Here is the advice he gave to a Brother¹⁶: *“You know what I told you about the little miseries that you have to endure: I suffer for you and with you, but I fear that you lack patience, and that you overdo the criticism that you burden your antagonists with: this will but increase tension, not reduce it or make it disappear. Moreover, a religious should avoid breaking the already broken reed and avoid causing trouble to those who cause him most trouble. It is not enough to carry the crucifix on one’s chest; one must also have in one’s heart a sincere love of the cross. I give you this advice because I think that I feel irritation in your letter, and because there certainly was some in what you said to your Rector. Never tire to have for him, as in the past, all sorts of considerations, and avoid with extreme care in your language everything that is too harsh and may cause injury.”*

Giving in to irritation or using severe words of reproach, trying to defend oneself rather than listening to others are wrong tracks that deceive us and distract us from the love of Christ. It takes a real effort to know ourselves at all times and to exercise control over our feelings. For this, community life is a wonderful school. Fraternal relations that small conflicts can

¹⁶ To Brother Lucien Deniau in 1843

easily contaminate are the daily tests that check our ability to be truly free. If we are not careful, in fact, we let the "evil spirits" influence us. As we hold firmly to our little truths, it takes very little to trouble us and irritate us. To give peace a chance, we must be able to distance ourselves and not take ourselves too seriously. *"Be assured that all the thoughts that cause discouragement and confusion, diminish your strength, dampen your zeal, do not come from God and cannot lead you to him."*¹⁷

We also need freedom of mind to pray in truth. That is why the silent prayer of meditation is important. It teaches us to reject what comes from the spirit of falsehood and pride, and to open ourselves to God alone in the simplicity of a right heart. The lack of inner freedom leads us to discouragement when prayer becomes more difficult and we feel we are wasting our time. The safest way is never to give in to fatigue through resignation. On the contrary, when adversity comes, especially in personal prayer, we must decide to hold fast. It is our personal responsibility which is at stake. If we abdicate before the required effort, we lose the fight and remain prisoners of our miseries.

Being free is also giving our consent to what we have not chosen, as we do through our vow of obedience. Sometimes, in fact, obedience leads us to "choose" what, by ourselves, we would not want to do. *"It is natural and easy to accommodate situations ... that come into our lives under a nice and cozy appearance. Problems obviously arise when faced with what we dislike. But it is precisely in these areas that we are called upon*

¹⁷ S VIII 2487

to choose what we do not want that we become truly free,... Therein lies a paradoxical law of existence: we cannot be truly free if we do not accept not always to be free."¹⁸

Of course, everyone at every stage of his life, must work out his own path to truth with himself and learn to take up his cross in the footsteps of Jesus. It is with a simple, honest and free heart that allows itself to be taught by the Holy Spirit and that rejects mediocrity, tepidity, compromises and lies that we will succeed in remaining faithful to the Lord's calling and to our commitment. And we will bear "much fruit."

3. *"Have but one heart and one soul among yourselves."*

We know the insistence of Father de la Mennais for unity among Brothers in communities. He himself tried to build it through the advice he wrote to each Brother on a regular basis. It is good for us to reread it and to apply it to ourselves.

*"Yield to your brothers on all occasions and in everything: he who does so is blessed by God and men."*¹⁹ What's more difficult in everyday affairs than that patience that makes us accept the unacceptable? We have said it in the previous point: real freedom is measured by our ability not to get carried away by our own feelings. The slow conversion of our heart, throughout our life, appears in this ability not to condemn, not to judge, always to forgive, not to seek to be understood but to understand. God who loves without measure, wants us to love like him. The Gospel gives us this warning: *"The measure you use for others will also be used for you"* (Lk 6: 38). It is a law

¹⁸ Jacques Philippe, *La liberté intérieure*, EdB, p. 26

¹⁹ To Brother Lucien, 1831

inscribed in our being that we have been created to love. He who forgives will be forgiven; he who loves will be loved. *"Give and you shall receive"* (Lk 6, 38). Forget the mistakes of others, yours will be forgotten. *"Avoid with great care all that could ever so slightly disturb the peace; it is the most precious of treasures ..."*²⁰

It is difficult, however, to forgive when we feel deeply offended or when we are disappointed in the behavior of our Brothers. *"In order to be able to forgive, to live peacefully and without resentment even when the environment is causing us suffering through disappointing behavior, it is necessary to realize one important thing: the frustration described above must be radically revised because it does not match reality. I have to let myself be renewed in my mind and my judgment ... The devil often tries to discourage us, to demobilize us, to make us despondent in the service of the Lord, and one of his preferred means to achieve this is to make us worried about everything around us ... If I lose my fervor and become sad because of the problems around me, I solve nothing; I simply add one hurt to another."*²¹ John of the Cross said: *"Where there is no love, put love, and you will reap love."*

To love and serve one's Brothers is the advice so often given by our Father. It is a love that builds the community, which makes it mission-centred and which opens it up to the evangelical service of the poor. John Mary de la Mennais often recalled the requirements of a true religious community. He knew that spiritual life fades and sinks into mediocrity when

²⁰ John Mary de la Mennais to Brother Gerard, 1843

²¹ Jacques Philippe, *ibid.*, p. 76

Brothers do not support each other on the path to holiness. So our spiritual life cannot be lived alone. We are called to edify each other and to go to God together. It is not possible to grow in the spiritual life if we do not seek to support the zeal of our brothers without “giving them a lesson”. There is no personal holiness that does not radiate on others. This is what the Church says when speaking of community holiness. It was already our Founder’s wish: *“I am concerned that the Rule be very exactly observed in your house, and that you do all your main exercises of piety together: otherwise, there is no community, no fervor, and you end up losing entirely the religious spirit. For a good Brother, far from it being an embarrassment, it is a consolation, and, after all, whoever knows no discomfort, what does he know in the order of salvation, and how can he think himself a true disciple of Jesus Christ crucified?”*²²

A Brother’s holiness, therefore, is achieved through the community’s quest for holiness which is built through listening to the Word of God and putting it into practice, and in which each one commits himself, with great openness of heart, to love his Brothers no matter what might be the cost.

4. *“Sanctify yourselves while making saints.”*

*“Do not consider your vocation solely as regards your interests; consider equally the essential relationships which your state establishes with a multitude of children whose eternal destiny is, so to speak, in your hands.”*²³ Let us understand clearly what John Mary de la Mennais means. Jesus Christ is the

²² To Brother Porphyre-Marie, 1844

²³ S VII 2230

sole Saviour. In him we have life. The same goes for those whom we are entrusted with, namely the children and young people who study and grow in our schools.

Our presence among them is not meaningless. The teacher in his classroom, whether he wants it or not, exerts a real and profound influence on his students. He must therefore be very careful and know himself well. He must be well aware of the relationship which develops with the group of students as well as with each one of them. When John Mary de la Mennais evokes the “essential relationships” that a Brother has with his pupils, he refers to the bonds that the Holy Spirit creates between them and himself. The same One who is at work in him is also at work in them. Each Brother could speak of his own experience. There are moments when we feel that God is present and that, at the heart of our relationship with children, the Holy Spirit has discreetly introduced himself with meekness and intelligence. By way of illustration, let us reread the testimony of a former student – himself a Brother – about a Brother who died in 1894:²⁴ *“The day I became his student, he received us in class, my classmates and I, after speaking a kind word to each one of us. Straight away he won our hearts. I will never forget his attitude during the prayer, the first hymn that we sang, the lively lesson he gave us, a lesson interrupted by the prayer of the hour that we heard for the first time. On the evening of the same day, praise for our new master was on our lips, and our parents, charmed by our joy, soon gave Brother Zéphirin their esteem and respectful affection... As for me, I vowed to Brother Zéphirin the affection of a child for his father. My joy was to be with him. And after class, when he headed to*

²⁴ Brother Zéphirin Le Garrérès, died at the age of 58. Ménologe, Tome 1, 78

the church for his visit to Our Lord, I more than once followed him, and seeing him ... so collected, I thought inwardly: I too will be a Brother."

Reading these lines brings to mind the recommendation of our Founder to a Brother: *"Sanctify yourselves, sanctify yourself while making saints!"*²⁵ He explained to another: *"In your class, often raise your spirit to our Lord and ask him to bless your work ... do not consider yourself a secular teacher, but as a missionary responsible for establishing the Kingdom of God in souls: this is indeed your calling, and it will be while making saints that you will sanctify yourself."*²⁶ We touch the very heart of our vocation as Brother: ardently desiring the salvation of children and of young people, hoping that the Lord draws them to him, rejoicing to see some of them being taught by him and walking in his footsteps. Whether we be teachers, boarding directors, managers or other officials, or even when we no longer have contact with young people because of our age or our health, we still have in our heart an ardent prayer for youths and children. The heart of a Brother rejoices when he learns that young people come to God or let him in. He suffers at the sight of these young people who are injured or manipulated in their heart or their mind, or who, unawares, are attracted to dead ends. He prays and offers his life for all of them because he loves as Jesus loves them. He is bound to them in the Lord. He is like the father who waits for the return of his lost child. For him, they are all his children.

The Brother's vocation, and therefore his spiritual life, find

²⁵ To Brother Liguori-Marie, 1844

²⁶ To Brother Alfred-Marie, 1944

therein their full meaning. A Brother does not suffer for himself. He suffers for “his” children, those whom the Lord entrusts to him - but all are entrusted to him. It is “*your glory*,”²⁷ said Father de la Mennais to his brothers, “*your glory*” to serve children who are like “*the blind restored to light ... through your care.*”²⁸ This is your suffering, he could have added, to see all of those that you cannot reach, but for whom you give your life as an offering pleasing to God. The Brother joins the desire of the Son weeping over Jerusalem: “*Ah, if this day you only knew what makes for peace!*”²⁹ He prays for every young person, he “*often elevates his mind*” in the words of John Mary de la Mennais and asks the Lord to make him understand what “*message of peace*” can enlighten his life.

5. “Listening to the inner and life-giving Word of God.”

“*Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her,*” Jesus answered to Martha “*who was burdened with much serving.*”³⁰ The better part is listening to Jesus who, “*through his whole work makes Himself present and manifests Himself: through His words and deeds, His signs and wonders, but especially through His death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth*”³¹ shows the infinite love of the Father. This love is also manifested when motivated by the “*obedience of faith*”.³²

²⁷ S VII 2328

²⁸ S VII 2237

²⁹ Luke 19, 42

³⁰ Luke 10, 40 and 42

³¹ Dei Verbum, 4

³² Romans 16, 27-28

*"Let us open the ears of the heart so that the word of truth may penetrate in us and nourish our soul,"*³³ advised John Mary de la Mennais. He invited the adherents to Christian movements to have a New Testament and read a few verses every morning so that the Word of God might penetrate to their innermost heart and gradually carve therein the very image of Jesus. *"Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ,"* wrote St. Jerome. Not taking the time each day to listen with love to that Word which is *"God with us"* is running the risk of a poor and empty spiritual life, and of living an illusion.

That is why we must imitate Mary, the sister of Martha, at the feet of Jesus. Anyone who does not listen to the Word closes the Source of life flowing from the open side of Jesus. He shuts out the *"inner and invigorating speech that does not make noise at the bottom of our hearts, but which will thunder on the last day against those who will not have listened."*³⁴ Even if our days are full, we must not fall into the temptation to keep the book of life closed. The risk is too great to lose the very meaning of our vocation. Very many Christians today become aware of this and rediscover the importance of these few minutes which they give themselves reading the Word each day.

Religious Brothers should not have to be reminded of this. The words of our Founder from the Rule of 1825 are still valid for us today: *"Do not shorten your meditation, on any pretext whatsoever, because all of your exercises, this is the most necessary."* There, like Mary, we are at Jesus' feet listening to

³³ S III 927

³⁴ John Mary de la Mennais, during a retreat, S VII 2210

his word. He opens up his heart for us. He heals what is wounded in us. He listens to the secrets of our prayer. He helps those whom we entrust to him. This is the time of a heart-to-heart talk. His Spirit of love teaches true and gratuitous love. He brings peace and enables us to be like him, humble servants of our Brothers and of young people.

There is no spiritual progress or true evangelization without spending time, like Mary, listening to Christ. We learn that it is not we who bear fruit, but him, and we are filled with joy. With Mary, the Mother of Jesus, we sing: *"My soul glorifies the Lord ..."* Yes, *"the Word of God by itself possesses a supernatural virtue and its effects are wonderful."*³⁵ A missionary heart is a heart that listens to the Word of Life. *"If we have a strong desire to hear the Word that we preach,"* Pope Francis writes, *"it will be transmitted in one way or another to the People of God: 'For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks' "* (Mt 12, 34).³⁶

Let us also remember that for a Brother, the Rule of Life is the word of God addressed to him. Internalizing the Rule of Life, making it ours, is the surest way for a Brother of listening to the Word and of putting it into practice. It is this Rule, faithfully lived, which allows a Brother to live his vocation with a unified heart. *"See the Rule as an expression of God's will and its strict observance as the surest way to please him and sanctify yourself [...] The Rule is a friend that does not deceive, and a guide that never strays [...] If any article seems to you unimportant, distrust your judgment: there is nothing trivial in*

³⁵ Jean Mary de la Mennais, S III 928

³⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 149

*the service of God ...*³⁷ The surest way to grow as a Brother is fidelity to the Rule: this truth never grows old. Through it, God speaks to us and teaches us to adopt *“the spirit of our father”* by which he wants us to be like him. Faithful to the Word of God by way of obedience to our Rule of Life, we say to the Lord: *“Speak, and I will obey without hesitation, without complaint, with joy and love.”*³⁸

6. “Receive holy communion as often as possible.”

*“Through baptism, the Holy Spirit has consecrated our souls [...] he has adorned them with his gifts [...] he has chosen them as his spouse [...] he informs us of his inspirations [...] he leads and directs them in the practice of virtues [...] he makes them fruitful in every good work ...”*³⁹ These words say it all. If we repeat them and meditate on them, we can only marvel at God's work in us. We know that we are sinners and, the more we go through life, the more we measure the extent of our weakness and of our sin. This gift of the Spirit that we received at baptism and confirmation clothes us with light and love. We have put on the *“New Man”* (Eph 4, 24). Our life is fruitful, not because of us, but by the grace of his goodness and mercy. We find it so hard to be humble servants; we are much more likely to seek compliments, believing that God calculates our good deeds and judges as men do. We make ourselves miserable because we do not rely on the judgment of our sweet “good Master”; we have not really surrendered ourselves to his mercy.

³⁷ Excerpts from the Rule of 1825

³⁸ John Mary de la Mennais, S VII 2210

³⁹ John Mary de la Mennais to children, S II 632

That is why, even before speaking of the Eucharist, we should often meditate on the grace received in Baptism, reiterate that we belong to the Lord and that we are in his hands, that he takes care of us and that we are his “beloved”. Through baptism *“all of us are called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving love of the Lord, who despite our imperfections offers us his closeness, his word and his strength, and gives meaning to our lives. In your heart you know that it is not the same to live without him; what you have come to realize, what has helped you to live and given you hope, is what you also need to communicate to others.”*⁴⁰

We must also be faithful to the sacrament of reconciliation. Pope Francis, on March 28, 2014, when he chaired a penitential celebration in St. Peter's Basilica, was inspired by this passage from the First Letter of Saint John (1, 8-9): *“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us.”* The Pope added: *“He who experiences mercy is compelled to be an architect of mercy among the least and the poor.”* The sacrament of Reconciliation lights in us the missionary fire. If we will not receive the “sign” of the mercy with which the Father envelops us, we will not know how to reach out to those who are prisoners of their fears and wounds in order to tell them that God loves them. This sacrament of mercy is therefore of great importance today, for ourselves and for young people who need to know that God loves them so that they may grow.

The Rule of Life tells us that the Eucharist is *“the summit of*

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 121

*community life" (D 84). Echoing the words of our Rule of 1876, it adds: "It is the source of divine love, of zeal and of selflessness which has given strength to the martyrs, fashioned the purity of virgins and formed all the saints" John Mary de la Mennais also reminded his Brothers of this as he wrote to one of them: "One of the most effective means of perseverance is for you to receive Holy Communion as often as possible. It will be especially when you are blessed with the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ in you that you will receive more abundantly his lights, his consolations, his graces."*⁴¹

The Eucharist is the heart of our consecrated life. By uniting ourselves to Christ, we renew the total gift of our life to the Father. We reiterate to him that we fully belong to him and that nothing else in the world can satisfy us. He alone is our life, our salvation, our treasure. We let Christ come to us as the One who alone gives meaning to our existence and brightens our view of ourselves, of the world and of young people. When Christ is intimately present to us in communion, he speaks with us and fashions us in His image.

The Eucharist is also the fire that rekindles our missionary zeal. The Lord Jesus, whose broken body we eat and poured blood we drink, revives in us the desire to speak on his behalf and to be artisans of world salvation. Our lives are offered with his in sacrifice for the salvation of youth. The Eucharist celebrated and adored by the Church makes us eager then to be signs of Christ who heals and saves those who hunger for him or even ignore *"the Name that is above all names"*.

Each day of our lives we should receive the Bread of Life

⁴¹ To Brother Marcel, 1823

with humility and vigilance of the heart - which was not possible in the early days of our congregation. We should then be keyed up in our being, like Peter and John running to the empty tomb, hastening to the One who comes to us so mysteriously and so really. *"Let us take great care never to get used to this holy sacrament,"*⁴² Father de la Mennais told one of his Brothers. It is in the Eucharist that we bring our life, our morning prayer, the Divine Office prayed with our Brothers, the day's work, words that are spoken or heard, listening that is granted, pardons that are given, those that we refused to give, our impatient, uncontrolled tantrums, our jealousies and our narrow and hard judgments, our good deeds and our sin. As we give all of these to the Lord in the Eucharist, he purifies them and makes them fruitful through his mercy. It is also at the heart of the Eucharist, in the hands of the One who is actually present in so great a sacrament, that we bring all those whom we love, first and foremost our Brothers and the young people of our schools. At this point, we truly give our life to those for whom it is offered. The world is there, and we offer it with the Lord.

The Eucharist is the time of day that a Brother should love above all. It should therefore never be omitted, except when it is impossible to do otherwise. *"The first duty of consecrated persons is to themselves, and they fulfil it by opening their hearts to the promptings of the Spirit of Christ,"* wrote John Paul II (VC 25). It is at the time of the Eucharist that is realized in truth this action of the Spirit who transforms us into the image of the Son offered to the Father. Do we wish to know if we are making some progress on the journey the Spirit leads us

⁴² To Brother Polycarpe, 1841

on? Let us then consider the intensity of our desire for the Eucharist and the way we live it, and we shall be set.

7. *“Have a most tender devotion towards Mary.”*

Since we are considering how to live by the spirit of our father John Mary de la Mennais, we cannot omit speaking about Mary. When our Founder invites the Brothers to pray to Mary, it is always to imitate her virtues of humility and of self-denial. He invites them to be those “little ones” that the Lord loves and calls to him. Now, who better than Mary, the humble handmaid of the Lord, has conformed her will to God’s?

We are right to love Mary who pondered in her heart the events that she was living near her son. She treasured in the silence of her heart everything that she received from him. The love with which she was surrounding him was pure listening and service. The example she gives us is that of love that keeps in the background and never judges. She is always eager to serve, never to be served.

If we want to be like Jesus, we must ask Mary how. Who better than Mary can obtain us this favour? That is why Father de la Mennais advised his Brothers to have *“the most tender devotion toward the Blessed Virgin”*. This is what the Rule of Life asks us: *“The Brothers love to give daily expression to their veneration of the Virgin Mary, especially through the meditated recitation of the Rosary, a traditional prayer in the Congregation.”* (C 44). The Rule recalls that the Rosary is the prayer that Brothers like to say daily. It stresses that this is a tradition in the Congregation. This humble prayer to Mary is a way then to be faithful to the spirit of our Father. Father de la Mennais held fast to this practice: *“You must always say the*

Rosary of the Blessed Virgin; it is the Rule, and the Rule does not change.” Here’s what he wrote in the Rule of 1825: “The rosary is one of the most beautiful devotions to Mary, and one of the most holy prayers ... Always wear a rosary on you, because it is the livery of the servants of Mary, the mark of her children.”

However, too many are the Brothers who have lost the habit of saying this prayer. Fortunately, many Brothers, among them the oldest, are often seen rosary in hand. How numerous are the graces received by the fidelity to that humble prayer of those who have a childlike heart? Will we ever know one day in order to give thanks?

All those who pray to Mary are sure to be opened to the graces of the Spirit. If, indeed, we want to grow in the spiritual life, to be fashioned by the Spirit, to become saints, we must pray to Mary. And the best way to do this is to pray the rosary every day, as our Rule requires of us, while pondering the mysteries of the life of Christ. John Paul II reminded us: the purpose of the Rosary is *“contemplating the face of Christ with Mary”* and collecting its spiritual fruits.

I urge you, Brothers, to find the path of the rosary. Resolve to grant Mary at least fifteen minutes of each of your days; in return, Mary will sustain you marvellously on the pilgrimage of life. Likewise, treasure the prayer of consecration to Mary. Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort explained its meaning to us. Consecration to God through Mary is an act of surrender and trust, like John, the beloved disciple of the Lord, when he took into his home the mother of Jesus (Jn 19, 27). After the example of the Fathers of the Church, who had already introduced this practice, and at the invitation of Father de la Mennais, we would like to enter into this intimate relationship

with Mary and tell her we trust her because she is our mother and guides us safely amidst the obstacles and difficulties of life.

CONCLUSION

Throughout these pages, we have looked at our life as a journey, a pilgrimage, a path of growth, an ever more faithful response to the call of Christ who invites us to walk in his footsteps, to adopt his way of thinking, of loving and of self-giving. In so doing, we have mentioned on-going formation. In the words of *Vita Consecrata*: *"The consecrated person can never claim to have completely brought to life the "new creature" who, in every circumstance of life, reflects the very mind of Christ. [...] None are exempt from the obligation to grow humanly and as Religious; [...] no one can be over-confident and live in self-sufficient isolation; [...] there is no age at which a person has completely achieved maturity."* (69)

As we are educators by vocation, we know the importance for young people of entering into life not so much with the constant concern primarily to accumulate knowledge, but first and foremost to acquire the ability to be free and responsible agents on their own journey through life lived as the realization of a "vocation", the answer to an inner call in the context of

both a personal and collective history. The same applies to each one of us.

As early as the initial training, we must be aware that we embark on a path that is not defined in advance. God calls us. We set off with him on a continual dialogue that involves us more and more personally. The "yes" that we said at the beginning of this pilgrimage is expected to become increasingly radical. Personal motivations purify themselves. The more or less acknowledged self-seeking interests which were part of our early response must be purified by trial and be fully open to the action of the Spirit who makes our paths straight. It is not possible to be Brother, today as yesterday, without having decided in one's heart of heart, to take the steep and narrow path that leads to the true light.

Our spiritual life cannot be authentic if we are not firmly committed to seeking the truth of our being. We must ever be vigilant, mind and heart alert to discern the call of the Spirit at the heart of the hustle and bustle of our lives. Let us not run the risk of hearing Christ provocation: *"You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky; why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"* (Lk 12, 56). While walking with our Brothers and Laypeople in the light of the charism that we share with them, we must "see" and "recognize" the "time" of Jesus and decide to take the steps which accurate assessment demands. But you cannot really discern the things of God save in a heart renewed by the grace of his Spirit.

This is why I have invited you, Brothers, to take time to ponder the words of our Father John Mary de la Mennais, to better know the secret words that the Spirit of God speaks in

the intimacy of your being. I pray that God may give rise in each one of you to the desire to be true disciples of Christ who do not follow the *“spirit of error”* but *“the Spirit of truth”* (cf. 1 Jn 4, 6). We know that the Spirit of truth is faithful. Through him we heard our *“first call”* which then led us daily on the road of life to the ultimate call to share his eternal glory with the Son in the Father.

Finally, a last word from our Father to lead us on the beautiful pilgrimage of our lives:

“Let us love God, for tomorrow we shall stand before Him, we shall be with God, with God alone! Oh! if tomorrow we can say to God: my God, I have loved you, I love you. This will be heaven. My God, here’s my heart, fill it with your holy love.”
M. 29

Brother Yannick Houssay

Roma, August 15, 2014

On the feast of the Assumption of the B V. Mary.



God Alone

