

For the young people  
A week of prayer  
« Novena » to Jean-Marie de La Mennais

November 2016

La Mennais

God + alone



## 1. Feeling oneself called by God: a secret in the intimacy of the heart



Everyone has a vocation. Everyone has his vocation that he gradually discovers in the secret of his heart, by dialoguing with God who mysteriously talks to him. We need to keep, silence, to listen and to interpret the signs that God puts on our path.

Jean-Marie was born in France: a nation that has always been permeated by Christian faith, both in its culture and in its institutions. He was born at Saint-Malo: a town with a universal vocation where journeys and adventures do not scare, but rather opens to the whole world. He was born in a wealthy family, ready to serve: to put its own property at the service of the common good, without being withdrawn on itself. In his family they breathed the Christian faith: the mother being at the centre. She lives her warm and authentic faith and transmits it to her family members: to her husband who applies it to the public service, to her sons so that they could make it the motor of their lives and be the reference in their vision of life.

The light of faith which – according to our way of seeing – does not last for a long time: only after seven years for Jean-Marie and the mother Gratiennne ended his mission on earth to continue it in heaven. But from now on the fire of faith was lit up. Now everything was seen and judged according to the Gospel. Jesus was at the centre of his life. Deep in his heart of a child and then of an adolescent, the light, the hope and the mission of life it would be he to carry them.

It is thus that gradually the dialogue with Jesus developed in his life. At home, at church, on the roads, in the squares, in the events a leit-motif. In the vast house he would not let himself be taken up by wealth and economic benefits; he did not yield to the fever of exotic adventure; or be taken up by the prospect of power. In his heart and in the secret of his conscience, he followed the words of Jesus and established relations with him. The cathedral became his second home, but which, with age, became the first.

**Lord, you call me, and I answer you:  
Here I am, may your will be done  
Like for Mary,  
for the Saints and for Jean-Marie.**

## 2.- A project within the history of his time.

**1780** -Jean-Marie was born into a bourgeois family, full of initiatives and many activities: his father had a small merchant fleet. A family which, instead of being preoccupied with its own well-being, was sensitive to the needs of the poor and society. In the atmosphere of the time they felt the wind of new ideas and move-



ments that wished to break down the old regime of privileges and injustice, to build a society where all would have the same rights, a democratic, egalitarian and free society. The Robert de La Mennais family participated in this change, in line with the "Enlightenment". There was, however, something in the mind of Jean-Marie that he could not accept as a child, as a teenager and as a young man. Why were all these important values of justice, religion, faith, the Church and God himself regarded as enemies to be destroyed? In fact, in 1789 the Revolution broke out at the cry for human rights and those of the citizen; and suddenly it turned into the cruel persecution of the representatives of the former government.

Even the Church was hit by this will of destruction, not because of any unjust privileges, or of reasons of excessive wealth, but only because it represented God. And then, following the revolutionaries, nothing and no one would put limits on the omnipotence of human reason, to the government by the people, to the values of the revolution, who thus became the new religion. This is while churches were desecrated, the sacred images destroyed, reason elevated to the high rank of divinity, priests and bishops persecuted or sentenced to the guillotine, social and cultural activities of the Church swept away like rubbish, and often without building something to replace them.

Jean-Marie was looking on. He watched the priests go up to the scaffold, the abandonment of a people who would deny its history and its traditions, to be submitted to a group imposing its ideas through terror. He saw the poor, the children, the sick abandoned to the margins of society. He saw a cold society and without love. But was religion really the enemy? On the contrary, religion was the salvation: a society based on Christian foundations would take care of the last, the fragile, it would bring true justice and brotherhood in accordance with the commandment of love, it would give each one his dignity and render him divine and precious. It would make the family a home of love and life. The Christians had hope Jean-Marie had made his choice and had taken a decision.

**Lord, I was born in this time of grace, make me sensitive to the needs of my time. May my eyes, my ears, my heart and my hands be open to the cry of my brothers like those of Jean-Marie did.**

### **3. A profect prepared with zeal and love.**

On seeing Priests, Sisters and Christians mount the scaffold, Jean-Marie decided: I will become one of these priests who will soon be killed by the revolutionary "justice".



It is only in the Christian faith that we can build a just and fraternal society. It was necessary, however, that Jean-Marie prepared himself for this enterprise, that he gave a cultural, social and spiritual foundation to his grand "dream".

He started studying. At the beginning, almost by himself, but, without a teacher, one cannot go very far. There was his intellectual, erudite and very cultivated uncle Des Saudrais. But his knowledge was imbued with the ideology of the Enlightenment "and suspicious of religion, or even against. He had to be on guard. To study safely and inspired by faith, Jean-Marie, wisely and humbly turned to two priests. Father Engerran who was already old, but strong in faith. Father Vielle who was young and had

already given proof of his fidelity to the Church during the revolution by living in hiding. The two priests were the mentors of the young Jean-Marie: he found in them the intellectual support, help in discerning life choices and encouragement to live like Jesus. At the base of the spirituality of the two friends, there was another religious, Father De Clorivière, a Jesuit, founder of the Priests of the Sacred Heart, an association that brought spiritual support to isolated priests. Jean-Marie also struck up a friendship with him. Here is how Father De Clorivière encouraged him: "You should no longer live for yourself; you belong to the One who died for you. His Spirit must inspire all your actions. "

Jean-Marie was now decided to follow Jesus radically. And his lifestyle was consistent with his faith. Thus he began to study methodically and regularly, with the passion of knowledge tempered by the rigorous discernment. It was thus that he made the choices of shows and entertainments according to the criteria of beauty that respects human dignity. For that reason - an example among others - he managed to keep his eyes closed during a show at the theater which was not consistent with his conscience. By this he sought to refine his character and make it closer to the Gospel comportment. Thus his uncle Des Saudrais presented him "Virtue seems to be something natural to him, that he could not overlook. He had a tendency to anger which he managed to dominate to the extent that this disposition was transformed into a permanent gentleness". Everything was therefore ready for the important step.

**Lord, grant that I may not spend my childhood years looking for my selfish desires, but in the development of all my abilities so that I may become a valuable resource for your kingdom like Jean-Marie de la Mennais.**

#### **4. The decision : to become a priest at the risk of his own life**

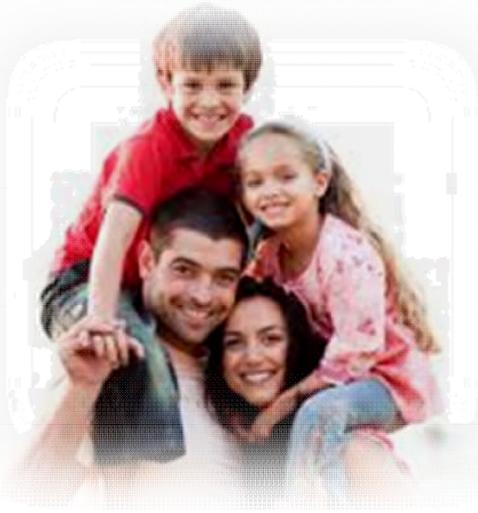
"If you cannot find something or someone for whom you are ready to die, you are not fit to live." Jean-Marie was now ready to devote his whole life to this project of faith. He only awaited the return of the one to whom he had promised, at the time of his adolescence, to become a priest. This person was Bishop De Pressigny, former Bishop of Saint-Malo. How many times did Jean-Marie, while walking around the ramparts surrounding the town not turn his gaze to the far-off horizon, to offer himself also as a new corsair, the corsair of God and of the Church on the sea of modernity and the new society.

The opportunity presented itself at the party of the great missionary, St. Francis Xavier. His father finally agreed to let Jean-Marie become a priest. He too would be a missionary, to the end of his strength. He too would carry the gospel and the person of Jesus in the advanced worlds, but where civilization without the Christian faith really gave no human perspectives.

It is thus that Jean-Marie took the diligence and went to Paris. He had learnt that his bishop, Mgr de Pressigny, had left Switzerland and Savoy, where he was exiled and that he had



returned to Paris. He had promised to ordain him a priest and now it was the time. The bishop began by examining Jean-Marie: Was he the same boy passionate about Jesus, who wished to offer his life for the religion that revolutionaries wanted to destroy? Was he prepared for this mission? The interview took place at Vaugirard street, in the Carmelite church. Inside these walls priests and religious were imprisoned and executed without trial. One could still see marks of their blood on the walls. "And what if the revolutionaries were to resume their work of persecution and condemning people to death?" "They can start again. In Brittany I saw priests



die on the scaffold. I helped clandestine priests in their endangered ministry. My vocation was born from these images. I will be happy to live and die for my faith. "

Jean-Marie, at the age of 21, received the first "order" of the priestly ministry. Later on he wrote: "I presented myself to the Lord as a victim that must be consumed by the ardour of his love." A few years later he he was ordained a priest by bishop De Maille, a courageous bishop, who had remained at his post even during the period of Terror. Now Jean-Marie is a fully-fledged priest.

**Lord, may your project for me  
become ever clearer.  
Help me to embrace it with all my  
strength,**

**my intelligence and my heart  
so that I may put it to good use in the  
service  
of my brothers and sisters who need  
me  
as Jean-Marie consecrated himself to  
it.**

### **5. At the beginning of the project : Teacher and pastor at Saint-Malo**

Often dreams vanish in contact with everyday realities. But if behind the dreams there is a concrete project animated by a fiery zeal, it is the reality that changes.

This is what happened to the young Jean-Marie. He wanted to play his part in the reconstruction of Christian society on a new basis, and here he was already trying. We must train the younger generations of Saint-Malo.

There are no more schools. The adolescents have grown up away from any school, from the church and from any guide other than the violent ideology of the revolutionaries. Now we must pull up the sleeves and reconstruct society. A minor Seminary is born next to the cathedral. The beginnings were difficult, beyond their capacity. It was Father Vielle who was doing everything, assisted by Father Engerran already old and in poor health, and by some seminarians. When Jean Marie's old friends asked him to collaborate with them, he came to their rescue with enthusiasm and the desire to work. He taught philosophy and theology to the young people, almost of his age, and he is fully committed. He is not the type that improvises and takes things lightly. He spends a lot of time studying, a way



to advancing in his own knowledge. His doctrine is sound and his teaching lively: faithful to the Magisterium of the Church of Rome, based on Scripture and nourished by the teachings of the Fathers of the Church.

His superiors say of him: "He has great esteem for faith, modesty and maturity. He proves to be greatly talented in ecclesiastical matters, in dogma and morals. He is highly bound to the rules and the Magisterium of the Holy Roman Catholic Church. "They were rare and modest teachers of the minor Seminary, but they had great wealth: a perfect union made them members of one body, and the students received a solid and warm education.

In his "free" time, Jean-Marie continued his pastoral work at the cathedral. He distinguished himself especially in spiritual direction and preaching. We have many samples of his homilies. An apostolic flame burns in these pages. Here are his ecclesial projects: three courses per day, preaching, spiritual direction, and counseling humble or powerful people. He spent his energies in realising the dream he had before. He did not spare himself of any fatigue, he gave himself completely with the energy of his youth. But his dream did not go away, instead it intensified every day and found ever more precise and open paths to new horizons.

**Lord, help me to be specific in my daily choices From now onwards may I find time to pray, to help the brothers and to go to meet the poor, starting with those who are close to me, and that I may take all my life as a gift like Jean-Marie**

## **6. A grand dream: like a "torrent of vague ideas"**

**13<sup>th</sup> November 1807.** Jean-Marie is 27 years old: he has the whole life ahead of him. A blank page to write with his abilities and the projects he makes. In a "torrent of vague ideas" he began to translate his thoughts, his future, his youthfulness and all that his strength would



make him embrace. It is Jean-Marie who writes, but he wrote under the dictation of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of fire that animates the Church and renews the face of the earth by igniting the fire of Christ the history and all the progress of societies.

Under his pen appears a huge site for the world: India, China, "unfortunate" Israel, the separated churches, all peoples of the world. It is an invitation to build unity, it is a distribution of tasks to pastors, theologians and missionaries, for new and necessary commitments. There are thus 33 articles of a programme for a struggle, a fight for spiritual "conquest" of new missions, urgencies to confront to reinstate the Church in the heart of the new society born after the Revolution. To put God and the Gospel within the new laws, of the democratic power, of the social conquests, of the culture that spreads as a result of the new technical, scientific, philosophical discoveries.

All these "vague " ideas, confused and intuitive converge toward the centre: the recapitulation of everything in Catholic unity, in waiting for the return of the Lord. The centre of the heart of world history, it is Jesus in his divine-human mystery.

"It was about four in the afternoon Jn 1:39." Like in the Gospel call of the apostle John, whom Jesus loved, it was the great call that took place in the person of Jean-Marie. It was the beginning of his vocation and mission. From then onwards he had to put all his abilities and energies into the realisation of this vision, which was the project that the Holy Spirit had "shown" him. Did Jean-Marie really realise it? The mysterious ways of Providence made him fail in his "great" projects in the "Congregation

of St. Peter” with people of high social rank, and they would make the small project for children succeed, for the simple people of God of the Congregation of the Brothers and the Daughters of Providence. But Jean-Marie remained faithful to the call God had shown him that Autumn afternoon of 1807.

**Lord, give me the courage to dream big, Do not let me stop in the marsh of the small egos, superficial entertainments, emotions of a moment, bonds without love give me a generous heart to embrace the little things, a love capable of overcoming discouragement and disillusion, because with God and faith nothing is impossible, as Jean-Marie dreamed and realised it .**

### **7. You are also called by Jesus for a great project**

God is calling you. Whoever you are. Weak or strong. Educated or not. Faithful to God or alienated from the Church. No need to have special gifts or exceptional qualities. Each one has his place that another will not take. No one is useless for God who does not classify people by order of importance. The only indispensable quality is the heart. It is a courageous response, without making too many calculations, with faith and a bit of unconsciousness like this girl called Mary, like this young man called Jean-Marie.

God calls you: he makes you see, like him, a vast field of mission, an abundant harvest that needs workers, without whom everything will fall into ruin. You are the hand, the intelligence, and the heart of God. There is a cold society, which produces the marginalisation and the waste, leaving the wounded abandoned along the road. There is a lost generation that seeks to drown itself with drugs of all kinds, which does not reflect the meaning, the joy and the enthusiasm for life. There is a world where walls, fences, divisions and enclosures engender suspicion, indifference, and conflicts that must be reunited, and put into a family. There is a

world that no longer has reasons to live, the meaning and the taste of existence, that lives day after day, and which does not succeed to go over the wall of death. There is a world without faith, that has lost the keys of its infinite dignity, of its divine dimension, with a thought that does not open to eternity and that imprisons everyone into a rich and desperate humanity.

You can respond like Mary, like the Saints, like Jean-Marie, like many others who did and who make their life a gift, a precious service to the world, and especially to the neighbour, and in a special way the more fragile and marginalised. Courage, you are not alone. There are a host of Saints that indicate for you the way and encourage you; there is a multitude of brothers who accompany you today, who set themselves to work with you; there is a community, a church that welcomes you and gives you strength, joy, wisdom, with the means and experience to realise your vocation in a way that makes you carry out the mission for which the Father has put you in the world. Courage, respond, you will make so many people happy and serene, and you with them.

**Lord, you call me by a strong and silent voice,  
You have for me a great project to holiness,  
Give me the strength to answer YES,  
Give me the light to understand where you want to place me,  
Give me a heart to know how to listen to the cry of my brothers,  
Give me the courage to go beyond myself,  
As Jean-Marie knew how to throw himself into the arms of Providence.**



- **Choose a hymn adapted to each day**
- **We pray for the sick, those in difficulty, and for the following intentions (we can say them loudly)**
- **Prayer for the beatification of Jean-Marie de la Mennais**

God our Father, you have given Jean-Marie de la Mennais,  
a generous heart and an unwavering zeal to know and love your Son Jesus  
and His gospel.

Grant us to follow his example.

Grant that we build united and fraternal communities.

Help us to offer your Gospel to the children and the young people of the present time.

For the glory of your Name, let the holiness of Jean-Marie de la Mennais  
be recognised and proclaimed by the Church.

And grant us through his intercession, the healing of persons recommended  
(silence)

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Lord Jesus, glorify your servant,  
Venerable Jean-Marie de la Mennais**

