

La Mennais Studies

IMPASSIONED ARTISANS OF MERCY

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BE MERCIFUL

"Be merciful
to obtain mercy for yourself"

(John Mary De La Mennais to Bro. Henri-Marie,
Novembre 2, 1851)

It is impossible to shield ourselves against the current that, this year, runs through the life of the Church, this circular torrent which irrigates the vessels and boosts the heart of every ecclesial community. We are in the Jubilee Year of Mercy. These thoughts may appear as our institutional contribution to the call of Pope Francis: one might think that this is a response to his request for reflection, to go forth, in view of a sympathetic research, and, ultimately that is an act of mercy among others. We could already say, according to the words of Genesis: "...and God saw that it was good." But there is more.

This book pursues the collection of **La Mennais Studies** devoted to the Mennaisian spirituality. Now according to the deep thought of Jean-Marie: the conception of God, the sources or the mission must care for themselves, the food that must nourish community life, is Mercy, that is to say the warm and

unconditional love of a Mother-Father who cannot but love, abounding in love and tenderness.

We will find the basic ideas outlined in the first issue of the collection, entitled "Received from God". Some are explicitly mentioned there: "His conception of God reaches surprisingly daring heights. In this passage, for example, where, from Psalm 100, he affirms that the main desire of God is to unveil his mercy. He feels himself loved by God as a source of love, because God has only the vocation to love... Jean-Marie is inhabited by a fundamental belief: « After all, what does it matter? Men are but blind instruments of God's designs, designs always full of *mercy* and goodness for his elected: *omnia propter electos* (*He does everything for his chosen ones*) »¹

Of course, Jean-Marie is dependent on theology and pastoral practice which, in his time, was characterised by strictness and fear. At that time, God was presented with the cold features of children's tale of a cruel stepmother or with a frowned look of a gendarme arresting someone having "burnt" the red light, rather than the profile of a loving mother.

If we read one or the other of the "missions" of Jean Marie in the parishes of Brittany, bright colours and threats of punishments of hell will inevitably arise, seasoned with severe words. This is the tax to pay to the customs of the culture of that time and the agreed rhetorical sermons and popular missions of the epoch... However, it should be added that, in the invitations to the Sacrament of reconciliation, he expands broadly to paint the overflowing love of God the Father.

By practising an approach void of any prejudice, a daily approach of recesses of the heart of Jean-Marie, he conceived the exercise of his mission as a ministry of nascent tenderness of

¹ "To Receive Oneself from God", La Mennais Studies n° 1, p. 5.

a heart changed by the vision of the needs of others. We find mercy at the centre of all his thought and action. Mercy is not on the sidelines, but constitutes the core of his spirituality.

Like the great musical works where the "ouverture" is a brief initial piece where the main themes are briefly introduced, we would like to present the main lines of the theme to arouse the appetite which should lead us to make of it the flesh and blood of our life.

Mercy is the truest definition of God. If, in the Old Testament, according to the tradition of the time, it was defined as 'I am who I am' or better: "I am the one who is... with you, the companion of your existence and your paths." And if, in the New Testament, we are told "your father is Merciful," we can say that compassion is essential in God, that it characterises him: Mercy is God or God is Mercy.

Because of this mercy, God recognises himself disconcerted: *"Is Ephraim, then so dear a son to me, a child so favoured, that whenever I mention him I remember him lovingly still. That is why I yearn for him, why I must take pity on him, Yahweh declares."*(Jeremiah 31, 20). *"Ephraim, how could I part with you. Israel, how could I give you up. My heart within me is overwhelmed, fever grips my inmost being. I will not give rein to my fierce anger. I will not destroy Ephraim again, for I am God, not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I shall not come to you in anger"* (Hos 11: 8-9). He cannot stop feeling head over heels in love with his creatures.

There is no logic in this excessiveness of love and tenderness. *"I shall cure them of their disloyalty, I shall love them with all my heart, for my anger has turned away from them"* (Hos 14: 5). It is here, in this deep ocean, that we can immerse ourselves like a dry sponge which is soaked through all its pores; it is in this moist earth that we can plunge our roots and flourish

while pushing our branches; it is in this prairie without enclosure that we are invited to run like a clumsy foal; it is in this maternal womb that we can be welcomed and recreated as new women and men.

« Be at peace, not because you are good, but because God is good and because he is a father. »²

We will not know anything about God in as much as we do not dare to believe that we are loved without deserving it, or rather yes, we deserve it, because it is precisely his love that, by enveloping us, makes of us good and valuable beings, beings worthy of being loved.

« What a promise ! How blessed is the soul on whom the Spirit of God rests! ... A soul that the Spirit is pleased to enrich with his joy. »³

This god on the look out is only an idol, the balance scale in hand to weigh our actions. We can confuse ourselves as Israel confused itself; but if one day we feel ourselves enveloped in a pardon which erases even the memory of our sins and establishes in us the lost innocence; if we feel that our deepest wounds begin to heal and if we breathe in an open space; so suddenly we find ourselves out of the pit where we had fallen again and out of the fatal belief that there is nothing more to do; if the one who does this with us, instead of blaming us for our shortcomings, "crowns us with faithfulness and tenderness" (Ps 103: 4), then we experience the God of Israel, the same experience that Jesus of Nazareth had.

« (Your trust) must not be based on your own merits, your ability and your natural lights, but only on God who is pleased to utilise the most insignificant and weakest

² To Miss Jallobert, in *The Memorial*, 126.

³ *Memorial* 70.

*instruments.»*⁴

We recognise that it is Him, because the experience of his love will be circulated; because, when we will know ourselves as accepted and loved, the same acceptance and the same welcome towards others will emanate from us. Whoever has amazingly experienced that love is given to him without merit, will no more have any need than the other be marvellous in order to love him. Whoever knows himself as re-made and re-born, because he received trust, will have to feel the responsibility to involve others in what was given to him as a gift.

*« My God, deign to grant my earnest prayer. I speak to you on behalf of the children you yourself have given me; you know how they are dear to me.»*⁵

It is possible, then we shall stop believing that it is we who make God interested in others, that it is we who are able to awaken His love. Because it is God who reaches us by his compassion; It is He who, at every moment, addresses to us the issue that stirs our coldness and our indifference: "*Where is your brother?*" (Gen 4: 9).

To pray is to expose oneself to this request, to accept to be contaminated with this concern and commitment of God with His creation. To enter into communion with the living God who makes us "go out of prayer" with a new sensitivity toward others, more vulnerable and interdependent, more capable to understand and to feel guilty, more willing to create bonds and to forge neighbourhoods, more pushed toward the dark periods of our history.

⁴ To Bro. Ambroise le Haiget, Paris, December 14, 1823.

⁵ Sermons II 671.

It's time to be silent to listen to the voice of the only One who is capable of talking to us in our hearts and make with us a new Covenant. Without any merit on our part.⁶

Note for reading this booklet:

1. The theme of mercy is a theme that has been and is deeply worked upon according to various points of view and different pastoral purposes. This booklet addresses the basic objective which embodies the entire collection of *Lamennais Studies* booklets to be a deepening instrument and an actualisation of the Mennaisian spirituality. But given the content of this issue, the pattern of each part will undergo a special treatment:

- A Bible text that will mark the meaning of mercy
- An explicit reference to Pope Francis in his letter proclaiming the Year of Mercy "*Misericordiae Vultus*".
- A spiritual journey for today to discover the coincidences and the specific ways of Jean-Marie de la Mennais and his writings .

2. Similarly, as in previous editions, therein will appear testimonies of Brothers and Laity from different backgrounds who can ask us questions or stimulate our procedure. This time we start a journey of hope: there will also be fresh testimonies, alive, of young people, of very young students who have reflected on the theme and who give us their convictions or their questions, their desires or their disappointments, with the sole purpose of mobilising Our faith and our hope. This type of testimonies will be accompanied by an explanation.

.....

Coming back to mercy is to re-weight a value without which the trajectory of the person would not be human. Above all, mercy is a human value, something that belongs to the cement of our most basic structure, something that makes us all look

⁶ Dolores Aleixandre, *Círculos en el agua*. [*Circles in the water*].

alike. Something so simple seeming to be contradicted by the evil that causes havoc in history.

Coming back to mercy is a human and spiritual act. It is to attain the deepest roots. It is to descend to the basement where is our need for and our aspiration to life. Also the reflection and prayer around mercy constitutes a basic task for faith, given that the apprenticeship of faith based on mercy is for many the success of a Christian journey.

On the other hand, we all know that it is there that one of the most important nuclei is found, no doubt the most important, the Gospel. Learning and living the mercy is to make oneself capable of taking up the Gospel, because without it, living the utopia of Jesus, the utopia of mercy, becomes impossible. In a spiritual work of mercy around, we stand at the hard core of the Gospel. The Word of God (and also, in our case, that of Jean-Marie) will be our main guide.

Pope Francis has decided to make this year unusual, a "holy year of mercy", an extraordinary year to progress in this mystery. We will also consider some aspects of the document *Misericordiae Vultus* (The Face of mercy). Learning from the one who appreciates this value can be very useful. This is said in no.3: "At times we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives".

Maybe it will be one of those 'times' to profit by the opportunity of approaching, with calmness, this evangelical and human value. Why would we miss the opportunity? By applying the components of the Word and the good words on our human and Christian journey, we discover new insights into the mystery of mercy. A new possibility, a new opportunity that can enrich our lives.

1- MERCY EVERYWHERE AND ALWAYS

a) With the Word as guide

«Then the Lord God ordained that a castor-oil plant should grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head and soothe his ill-humour: Jonah was delighted with the castor-oil plant. But at dawn the next day, God ordained that a worm should attack the castor-oil plant – and it withered. Next, when the sun rose, God ordained that there should be a scorching East wind; the sun beat down so hard on Johah's head that he was overcome and begged for death, saying:

« It is better for me to die than to live ».

Then God said to him:

- "Are you right to be angry about the castor-oil plant?"

He replied:

- "I have every right to be angry, mortally angry!"

Yahweh replied :

- "You are concerned for the castor-oil plant which has not cost you any effort and which you did not grow, which came up in a night and has perished in a night. So why should I not be concerned for Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, to say nothing of all the animals! »

(Jonah 4: 6-11)

This is an Old Testament passage from the book of prophet Jonas. It is a book dating from the time after the exile. No doubt that this is a fiction whose truth lies not in the facts recorded, but in the delivered message.

It is a picturesque narrative that tells us that a certain Jonas, a professional prophet, had made every effort to escape God who wanted to send him to proclaim salvation to Nineveh. This city remained in the consciousness of Israel, a symbol of imperialism, of the most cruel aggression towards the people of God. Jonas, a good Israelite, detested the Ninevites, a bunch of pagans, and was hostile to God's collaboration who wanted them to convert. So much so that instead of taking the direction to Nineveh, he took the opposite direction, one leading to Tarshish. But that did not count, on the part of Jonas, with the persistent love of God.

It is therefore a book that speaks of "resistance" before God, of intolerance compared to the merciful love of God ready to forgive the Ninevites if they repent, and to renounce retribution and vengeance to them. Thus Jonas will recognise that the real reason for his escape was not his mission to Nineveh, but God's love :

"Please, Yahweh, this is what I said to myself when I was in my country. That was why I first tried to flee to Tarshish, since I knew you were a tender, compassionate God, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, who relents about inflicting disaster..." (Jonah 4: 2).

God's mercy toward all and for all: It is necessary to smile at the tenderness, sensitivity and sympathy with which he presents the animals. When one announces a fast for conversion, a precise edict: "Men and animals, cows and sheep cannot take any food, neither eat nor drink; do not eat or drink; that men and

animals cover themselves with ash". And the final question strongly expresses a tender affection: "I should not have pity ... for so many animals?" (Jon 4: 11).

b) The word of Pope Francis

« Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. » (Misericordiae Vultus n° 2)

Mercy is a fundamental law and therefore universal. It resides in all reality, as cruel as it sometimes manifests itself. Living in the heart, it requires, if it is to be revealed, to open the way of the heart. It is not enough to appeal to principles or moral standards. The manner of looking is decisive. Mercy can only occur if we exercise "eyes of the heart", with a look that springs from the depths of ourselves, all loaded with a torrent of humanity.

c) From Jean-Marie

❑ The reality, the whole reality, blessing of the merciful God

In the first place, mercy is capable of seeing profoundly. First of all, mercy consists in a gaze that reconstructs, inside the merciful person, the moral and spiritual image of the one who arouses mercy in him. Before 'dealing with him' by acts, the merciful looks at him with a particular eye: he does 'not yet' see him, beyond the 'already' and of 'what was' the thing that all see. Mercy, before being an ethical action, is a movement of the soul that enables one to see the other according to the original plan he carries within him, prior to the error or the fall, and to love him in such a manner as to recreate his nature in the most authentic way. It allows the reconstruction within the soul of the broken image and recompose the broken frame.

It is impressive to see how Jean-Marie discovers in all the initial and native footprint, the one that stems from the purpose of the word of God. One can even enjoy the passion of love with which he discovers that all are images of the Word, and, therefore, objects of God's close, unconditional, and maternal love.

« The mysteries that religion reveals to us make us penetrate much deeper into the nature of God; they somehow open his heart for us; they show us all the riches of his goodness; they put his mercy before our eyes and the deeper we go into their depth, the more wonders do we discover therein. Ah! I pity those who do not feel how beautiful it is to see the Father adopting us all as his sons and extending to us this infinite love he has for His Word; how sweet it is to hear the voice of God who calls us and tells us: You are my children; you will have the same inheritance as Jesus Christ, your brother.»⁷

To see with new eyes that everything comes from the beauty, the goodness and the wonderful mercy of God. People, things, nature, all without exception come out of the hands and heart of the Father blest.

« Everything comes from the hand of our Heavenly Father.»⁸

The first contact between God and man consists in a blessing:

"God saw that what he did was very good" (Gn 1), good and valuable... We are born with this gaze upon us, with this original blessing and if we lose it, our whole task would consist in recovering this gaze of blessing on us and the world.

The original and primary desire of a child is that its mother gives it a look of love and a smile. This primordial look that gives

⁷ Sermons IV 1364.

⁸ Memorial 84.

the child the justification for its existence tells it, "welcome to this world". This is a gift that we would continually like to experience: a look of support and protection, a look on which we rely.

Such is the fundamental experience, original, basic and ours, that of everybody, that of all animate and inanimate reality. Everything finds itself anointed as the object of the merciful love. "I believe in God the Father Almighty", we say in the Creed and think about this mystery with our head, we cease to vibrate by the passion for the reality hidden in this formulation: the mystery of the explosion of love that it implies and which, sometimes, it is, for us, reduced to an exterior observation, sterilised, cold, without the palpitating heat that this mystery contains. Jean-Marie explains well the two levels involved by 'creation' :

« There are two worlds, one is the work of the almighty God, the other is the work of His grace and His goodness and no one can explain one without the other. The first of those worlds, God so manifests his greatness that the hearts of all who show gratitude and love and they discover the very depths of his being. This is how we can all perceive the truth of these words "God is love" (1 John 4:8). But it is only faith that gives man the power of understanding; and, "Where are those who have faith?" »⁹

⁹ Memorial 56.

Here is a living testimony of a student. Cheerful, discreet, full of vitality. 17 years of age. When she wanted to verbally express her feelings, words failed her. She was moved to tears. "what I never tell anyone, is very intimate, I do not even tell it to my mother."

" I do not believe in any particular god. Specifically, I have no religion. I do not believe that God is someone who tells us how we should act. I do not believe in a God who would punish us for this or that action.

I think that the divine is within each one of us and it depends on each one to put him in light, by acting in the best way possible according to our possibilities and by making the best of ourselves. I do not believe that to be baptised, for example, is the first step to meet God. But to take a step forward for me is to consider my action on every occasion, to accomplish it the best way possible, and move towards the common good.

For me, God is in this quest for hope that lives in us by the time all is lost. In my case, for example, if I am honest and although it pains me to admit it, there were situations where, for one reason or another, I needed to talk to someone and I did not know with whom. Praying was a consolation to me when I did not know who to ask. Praying that everything goes well at the time of passing through difficult situations. Currently I even feel the need to be thankful for all the good that life gives us.

Whether he exists or not, I feel that in some situations, he helps us a lot, the fact of speaking with him or feeling that he is with us, within us. Sometimes we only have this hope which we do not know where it comes from, but it is the only thing that keeps us upright.

That is only a third of what I could say about this subject. But I'm very talkative and I cannot explain very well. It is difficult for me to find rightful words and expressions."

❑ A dangerous division

The one that makes a division between good and bad. It is dangerous because the 'good' is not as they say, nor the 'bad' as much as we say. The reality is more complex and ambiguous. It is therefore appropriate to abandon this obsession of cataloging, which does not mean devaluing the goodness or to make maliciousness ordinary, but to envisage another perspective of understanding of reality .

Jesus evaluates on the basis of the dignity of every person, not on the basis of morality. This allows him to be merciful even to those who morally raises a question (the sinful woman in Lk 7, the adulterous woman from Luke 8, Matthew from Luke 5). If we do not want to get stuck on the subject of mercy, we must abandon this classification and not deal out the indelible dignity of which every person and creature is endowed with. Mercy is associated with dignity. And no one is deprived of the inalienable dignity of being a son of God.

Like Jonah, we sometimes run the risk of wanting to eliminate the tenderness of God for certain categories of human beings by not supporting the idea that they can be his sons, and this because we consider them as our enemies. As the eldest son of the parable of Luke 15, we can observe scrupulously the orders of the Father, but keeping ourselves far from his heart and the whirlwind of his affection.

Jean-Marie had written in his notebook, that had become a memorial, a set of instructions that he would then transmit in some letters and sermons to the Brothers. They made reference to the attitude of compassion when one is faced with the weaknesses and 'bad' behaviors of the others:

« We should never be too careful not to crush the bruised

reed nor extinguish the smouldering wick »¹⁰

In his practice of directing the Brothers, Father de La Mennais will insist permanently on the care required in respect of the weaker members, the most fragile, the most troubled. Always choose to be on the side of indulgence and eliminate prejudices.

« The spirit of the Congregation must be a spirit of charity and of union. It will happen, no doubt, that among us there will be some, and me the first one, who will be in need of indulgence. Well then! We shall bear in a spirit of charity one another's burden. Alter alterius onera, etc. Far from being irritated by the defects of our confreres, as it happens too often, we shall think of humbling ourselves for ours, and we shall have, if I may say so, for our spiritual ills, the most attentive and the tenderest care.»¹¹

« When I speak of charity I do not mean only the love of God and the neighbour in general. I mean that we must be so united that there reigns among us such perfect agreement that we can truly apply to us this word of St Paul in all its depth: cor unum et anima una. I mean that each one tolerates the infirmities of his brothers, be they of body or mind, with a patience that nothing can alter. Infirmittates sive corporum sive animarum patientissime tolerant.»¹²

In his life, he experienced the blindness of 'good', the judgment of the 'sensible' the resentment of the 'well-intentioned'... who do not know God's heart, despite their fierce defense of orthodoxy. They are short of understanding that "mercy mocks judgment". It is especially painful to see how his

¹⁰ Memorial 18. Mt 12:20.

¹¹ Sermons VIII 2404.

¹² Sermons VIII 2533-34.

brother (and him also, in part¹³) is considered as bad, marginalised, not deserving any form of indulgence.

« Last Friday I wrote to that poor Féli a few lines full of pain and friendship; he has not yet replied, and perhaps he will not answer me, because he knows that I have to go to see him on Wednesday of next week. So I do not know his provisions, but I pray to God with all my heart to extend to him his hand of mercy, that sweet hand that snatched St. Peter from the waves, and that blessed the poor repentant sinner at his feet: he has no other course to take, as you say, but to submit with docility and simplicity of a little child: to act otherwise would be plunging oneself into an abyss. A letter from you in these painful circumstances, will produce, hopefully, a happy effect: ah, pour, pour balm on his wounds: too many people, for various reasons, will respond by sprinkling it with plenty vinegar and salt, without mixing a drop of oil! »¹⁴

We will never understand anything of mercy if we lose faith in the prime goodness of everybody and everything. To avoid this, we must continually practise a reading of reality as the background of goodness, since certainty is acquired after a lot of training. Do not crash yourself against the wall of appearances : the appearances, not only do they deceive, but also they destabilise us and make us give up, full of bitterness, the path of goodness and mercy. The Word, proximity, the gaze of kindness, piety, the fact of putting oneself in the place of another, to touch his reality, might perhaps be the ways to achieve agility to jump over such a wall.

¹³ Bruté his old friend, the most intimate of his friends, Titular Bishop of Vincennes in the United States, visits Brittany. He went several times to La Chesnaie to "convert " Feli, but all in vain. On the occasion of printing the Rule of the Brothers, he wrote to Jean-Marie: "The name of Lamennais should not appear, because it now awakens an involuntary revulsion in every Catholic and Christian heart."

¹⁴ To Miss De Lucinière, July 24, 1834.

When mercy is veiled, it is necessary to tear the veils of stereotypes, labels, prejudices and achieve the fundamental truth, the essential identity: everything is blessed, loved, touched by the goodness of God who establishes and rehabilitates all. Nothing is lost, everything can be loved because everything is crossed by the dignity that gave it that look which "saw that it was good". It remains valid, the commitment of not yielding to the torrent of wickedness that stifles us sometimes, that can arouse the cooling little breeze of mercy.

2. THE MERCY THAT COVERS THE HUMAN WEAKNESS

a) With the Word as guide

« The man called his wife Eve - that is to say, The Living - because she was the mother of all who live. The Lord God made tunics of skins for the man and his wife and clothed them. The Lord God said, "Now that the man has become like one of us in knowing good from evil, he must not be allowed to reach out his hand and pick from the tree of life too, and eat and live for ever!"

The Lord God expelled him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he had been taken. He banished the man, and in front of the garden of Eden he posted the great winged creatures and the fiery flashing sword, to guard the way to the tree of life.» (Gn 3 : 20-24). »

This is a text of the priestly source "P", born from the ecclesiastical circles and whose main objective is to manifest rather than to aspire to power, to the absolute power, is the greatest disaster for a human being and for creation. The theme of the " tree of life" is basically that of power.

But there was an image in the text, a metaphor, that recalls much the Yahwist source, "J", full of anthropomorphism, of closeness and of humanity: this painting of a God – a fashion designer who sews with love the skins for Adam and Eve who, being naked, could catch the cold. And he clothed them, as a mother does for her children when still small. Here we have the profile of the mercy of God: he sews, he favours the one who has not understood the meaning of the relationship, to the one that has not been formed in

the most basic human relationship. He does not leave him in his bewilderment, in his ruine, but he continues to love him and honour him by sewing a garment for him. He sews with love and in tears: with love because he loves him, in tears because he sews for the one who took another path. But he sews.

Mercy that goes beyond all evil, willing to be present despite any deviance, without asking for anything, without complaint, without claiming any rights or liabilities.

Mercy that covers human weakness, that dresses the nakedness of its vulnerability, and which envelopes the warmth of its attention.

b) The word of Pope Francis

« Patient and merciful.” These words often go together in the Old Testament to describe God’s nature. His being merciful is concretely demonstrated in his many actions throughout the history of salvation where his goodness prevails over punishment and destruction. » (Misericordiae Vultus n° 6)

Whoever is merciful finds another form of mercy, a form that is really courageous and sublime, the one he exercises towards himself. The one that is capable, by gratuitousness and virtue, of practising mercy toward others, one day discovers in himself the gift of a particular gaze. This gaze allows him to see the dimensions of his own life that does not please him and makes him suffer. That day, his entrails begin to move in the brutal encounter with the person he did not want to see face to face, and yet he has missed appointments with him, his equivocal crossroads, his history that he did not want to write, and yet he has written it.

c) From Jean-Marie

□ The mercy that embraces our vulnerability:

It is perhaps significant that in the Memorial, the notebook of personal notes that Jean-Marie wrote from day to day, the first thought written on the 1st April 1809 is:

*« Have pity on yourself and God will have pity on you. Say “I am guilty” and he will answer: “Come, my son, that I may forgive you; come, my poor child, come to your father.” He will open his heart to receive you. You will be very happy to rest on the bosom of your father.»*¹⁵

A strong call to live fragility as grace. Be merciful to yourself and God will be merciful to you. Love yourself, to be able to open yourself spontaneously to God's love for you. Mercy, in fact, has the primary task of letting itself to be surrounded by a maternal tenderness that always goes beyond the vulnerability in which we are born and which accompanies us always.

Every human being, like Jesus, receives itself from a blessed look. All the time spent at Nazareth was to welcome this look bent over to his beautiful and precious life.

I need also to experience this look in my own life, that look that considers me as good and precious, which rejoices in my life, which gives me the space I need to grow and live in love. But in life we also experience other kinds of looks: suspicious looks and lack of hope. And because of our own condition, we glance on what we lack, our limits, our wounds... Faced with these looks that discourage us, God's mercy strengthens his look that makes us feel good, that welcomes us, that makes us be and invites us to confidence. Instead of emphasising the extreme, he helps us to realise the gift received.

« To abandon ourselves to the mercy of God is the best way

¹⁵ Memorial 1.

to obtain mercy. God is so good that he is pleased to see us rely on his infinite goodness; he loves to see us rest peacefully on his bosom; our peace is his glory. This thought is very consoling and the Christian who meditates on it in his heart is delighted.»¹⁶

We must gradually accept with joy and gratitude that in relation with God everything is an unmerited gift, but received; that God's mercy restores the blessing of his first look. Thus we can feel - as Jesus himself felt - this blessing gaze on our lives, as a fresh water which moistens our land, and reveals to us the best.

« What had we done for him that he should have loved us so? What is there in us that is worthy of attracting His glance and His mercy? Nothing, my daughter! But he sees us covered with the Blood of His Son, and it is Jesus Christ that He loves in the poor sinners who present themselves to Him as His members forming, in some way, one body with the One in whom He has put His eternal complacency. »¹⁷

Fragility is part of a human being. In short, simply and strongly, the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano described the reality of the limits of the life of a human being.

«Oriol Valls, who takes care of newborns in the maternity at Barcelona, says that the first human gesture is the embrace.

Once they come into the world at the beginning of their lives, babies move their hands as if they were looking for someone.

Other doctors, who care for older people, say that at the end of their lives the elderly people, die wanting to raise their arms.

¹⁶ Memorial 13.

¹⁷ To Miss Amable Chenu, July 12, 1816.

And that's how it is, despite all the diversions we give to a thing and all the words by which we designate it.

In short, everything is reduced to this:

between two agitations, without further comment, unfolds the journey.»

Besides this fragility and this radical weakness of human finitude, we can make a long list of many other limitations, in addition to physical limitations: our difficulty to leave ourselves to be loved or to love gratuitously, or to realise at what point vanity, or the thirst for fame or rivalry reins over our lives or contaminates the deep motivation of our noblest causes.

We can also follow the path of selfishness and manifestations of selfishness, of our insatiable desire to put ourselves always at the centre of the fear of facing the conflicts of everyday life or the need to fall again on our feet, and the desperate search for the approval of others. Or, on the contrary, we can constantly have the need of an enemy, of never agreeing with anyone, of feeling different from the rest of humanity, to deny any involvement and criticise everything with an air of superiority.

I can also rely on my aggressive and disproportionate reactions or on that infuriating attitude vis-à-vis the others that I continue to renew. I can consider my timidity and my impulsive social relations; my perfectionism or conformism; my anxiety and hyperactivity or my inability to act. I can remember the times of anxiety, fear, malaise, bad humour or anger without apparent reason that make me unhappy without my knowing how to remedy it. I can think of my tendency to speak ill of the others in their absence or being aware of those situations where I have done wrong to others or where I was unfair to the people I love most.

But then we must strongly remember the very wonderful

question of Psalms 8 and 144, " What are human beings that you spare a thought for them? "We need to let the Gospel and the others to make us recover the view, wake us up and make us become men with wide-open eyes, that look at life in its depth and vulnerability, but also in its infinite possibilities. Our smallness is embraced by Someone, with a Love great in mercy .

«Do you think he will abandon you when you are weak ? Do you think he will refuse the grace that you need so much because you are poor ? No, no, he will give himself to you with all his wealth; he will be delighted to pour on you all the riches of his mercy. Be sure that you can expect from him pardon, understanding and love, even though you may be convinced that you can expect only misery and sin from yourself»¹⁸

Jean-Marie perceived, like a few people, his own weakness. Especially in his youth, his physical and moral weakness led him to confide his condition to his closest friend :

« My dear Bruté, pray for me with renewed fervour. If you knew how poor and weak I am, you would have had pity on this brother Jean-Marie who has received so many graces and who uses them so badly! Is it not dreadful that all the passions are still alive in the depths of this heart in which Jesus Christ descends every day? Pray for me. »¹⁹

But at the same time, he will recognise that this fragility is grace, that it renders one capable to directly experience the radical mercy of God.

« (God) wants us to throw ourselves with eyes closed into his mercy as one would do into an abyss. »²⁰

¹⁸ Memorial 7-8.

¹⁹ To Bruté de Rémur, July 4, 1807.

²⁰ Memorial 126.

The following testimony does not directly flow from the reflection of this notebook. But it is very appropriate to it. This is a text of Christian Chessel, White Father, assassinated on the 27th December 1994 at Tizi-Ouzou, whose funeral was celebrated by Father Christian de Chergé, of the Trappist Community of Tibhirine.

«In my weakness, I get my strength"

"Weakness" has a bad press in our world where strength and physical, psychological, intellectual health, are synonymous with development and social success.

Yet Saint Paul, in his letters, does not use the word "weakness" less than 33 times...

To accept our powerlessness and our radical poverty is an invitation, an urgent appeal to create with others non-power relations; recognising my weakness, I can accept that of others and see in it a call to bear it, to make it mine, through the imitation of Christ ...

Such an attitude transforms us for the Mission. It invites us to renounce all pretensions in the encounter with the other, however much he may be weak; and to go to him without fear of his physical, moral or spiritual weaknesses. I change my gaze upon the other and I do not try to impose it: any force other than that of the Spirit is in vain.

This attitude invites us not to fear the encounter with the other or of the event, however 'strong' he may be, but to go to him, in the strength of weakness, by relying on God alone.
(1 Cor 2,1-5)

This attitude of weakness can radically be misunderstood.
Weakness in itself is not a virtue;
but it is the expression of a fundamental reality of our being
which must always be shaped by faith, hope and love.

The weakness of the apostle is like that of Christ,
rooted in the strength of the Easter mystery and the power of the
Holy Spirit.

It is neither passivity nor resignation;
it requires a lot of courage
and compels one to be committed to justice and truth
by denouncing the illusory seduction of force and power.

It is at this price that the chosen weakness
becomes an evangelical and missionary attitude.
It frees us to love by making us be "all to all",
by reaching out especially to the weakest
by sharing "the weakness of the weak" (1 Cor 9,22) .

By this, the chosen weakness becomes
one of the most beautiful languages
to say the "discreet love" of God to men.
It also becomes a spirituality of empty hands,
where everything, even our weaknesses,
can be seen as a gift and grace from God.

❑ **By mercy we are strong in fragility:**

This was formulated with great force following the experience of St. Paul who, throughout Chapter 12 of the second Letter to the Corinthians makes a plea to justify his presence in the community of Corinth, despite his weaknesses, that all can see and a few criticise, to discredit his ministry. "When I am weak, its then that I am strong" (2 Cor 12, 10).

However the Word of God is constant in the presentation of this reality, throughout all the writings of the history of salvation.

● **Moses** : The biblical tradition presents, in the first place, his fragile and threatened life: "a baby that was crying" in a papyrus basket deposited among the reeds on the bank of the Nile river, "a little Hebrew baby boy" (Exodus 2: 3-6) sentenced to death at birth (Exodus 1: 15-22). These are the three gazes of three women on him that will save him: the one of his mother who saw that the child was beautiful, the one of her sister who watched him from a distance and that of Pharaoh's daughter who after discovering the basket among the reeds, looked inside, found a child crying, and was moved (...) she felt mercy. When the boy grew, the Pharaoh's daughter adopted him as a son and literally called him Taken, saying, "I drew him out of the waters " (Ex 2 : 1-10).

Perhaps it is this first passive experience of being "contemplated" that will make him a contemplative; this experience of being "taken", which will make of him someone who will draw the people from slavery; this experience of being "bought" from death will make him a leader committing his life to save others.

It is not the merits of Moses that gave his action a quality label. It is the gaze of Yahweh that remade and fortified him. It is this conviction which gave him the boldness to confront the Pharaoh, to the loneliness, and the rebellion of the people ... The

fact of knowing himself as mercifully looked upon allowed him to look at himself, without discouraging himself before the people to whom he must address himself in a clumsy language. Jean-Marie claims the same experience with his brothers:

*« It is with regret that I have noticed your tendency to discouragement; that is useless. I strongly recommend that you do all that is in your power to reawaken your trust. It must not be based on your own merits, your ability and your natural lights, but only on God who is pleased to utilise the most insignificant and weakest instruments. Be sure that He will not abandon you, and you must regard any idea to the contrary as a very dangerous temptation. »*²¹

He would receive his power of speech from the one who had told him: "See, I make of you a god to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet" (Deut 7: 1). Also he would fearlessly face established power saying, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel, Let my people go, so that they can hold a feast in my honour in the desert" (Exodus 5: 1). At the seaside, he will thus soothe the fear of the people, "Do not be afraid; stand firm and you will see what Yahweh will do to rescue you today; these Egyptians you see today, you will never see again. Yahweh will do the fighting for you, all you need to do is to keep calm. "(Ex 14 :13).

And after the victory over Egypt, he will attribute to God all the glory: «I will sing to Yahweh, for he has covered himself in glory, horse and rider he has thrown into the sea». He knew by experience where that strength came from : « Yahweh is my strength and my song, to him I owe my deliverance » (Ex 15 : 1-2).

He had learned that he could continue to hope beyond all dangers. He could do wonders by relying on someone who

²¹ To Bro. Ambroise le Haiget, December 14, 1823.

accepted his fragility; he could convince by his word due to the fact that he received a blessing upon his stuttering; he could be a liberator, not by himself, but for himself to be born again and to have been liberated.

« You see that your mission has the most admirable success; you should not attribute it to yourself; tell yourself often that God loves to use the most miserable instruments, so that it is obvious to all eyes that he alone is the author of the good done by his poor creatures. »²²

● **The Samaritan:** In the parable of St.Luke, the paradigm of Mercy, it is surprising the lucid realism of the author who does not erase the dark parts: an attack of the bandits, a robbed man, half dead and two travelers 'notables' who pass by on the other side (which inevitably reminds us of the banditry of our world, its forgotten victims on the borders of exclusion, the indifference of those who pass - including us - busy with our own affairs ...) .

And when the story persisted in making us believe that evil was the last word of things and that the situation was fatally irreparable, the narrator raises another figure on the horizon, preceded by a small grammatical word that we put on tenterhook , "**But** a Samaritan ...".

Where does the 'rupture' introduced by this '**but**' come from and what does it claim? This small 'but' does it not communicate to us something of Jesus' gaze on the story and its stubborn hope that it sees in it a strong resistance force, although weak in appearance?

Indeed, among the many signs of death, the Samaritan who appears on the scene does not seem to have a lot of resources, does not belong to any center of power that would help him and guarantee to him prestige or influence; he is a stranger, he travelled alone and relies only on his bag and his horse, but he has the gaze in wait and, inside, his heart vibrated to the rhythm

²² To Bro. Hervé Monnerais, July 24, 1847.

of the other.

And then he poses the minimum and immense gesture to approach the fallen man. When the others avoided him, without being shaken to leave him behind, he felt affected by the wounded and responsible for his misfortune. The urgency to reach out to the one in need throws behind all his projects and interrupts his journey. The concern for the threatened life of the other predominates his own plans and brings out the best of humanity: an 'I' he himself got rid of. It is a stranger that neither parental relation nor ethnic solidarity obliged him to pay attention to the other, but he stopped to help him; this is a traveler who descended from his horse, who changed his route and knelt near the other man; it is a schismatic who, however, behaved as his brother's keeper and who, in the commandment 'thou shalt not kill', read: "You shall make the necessary for the other to live".

This image of God – Love, that humbles itself, that forgets its greatness to be a companion on the way and a compassionate hand - is an image profoundly ancreed in the heart of Jean-Marie.

« Ah! How different his thoughts are from our thoughts! The more our misery is great, and the more he is jealous to show that his mercy is even greater, and the more he persists, if I may say so, to be loved by us, even at the expense of his own greatness; thus, he puts his glory in these humiliations and in the manifestation of a boundless kindness toward vile and disgusting sinners. Oh ! St John the Apostle, therefore, had good reason to contain all the Christian faith in these short words so simple, but so beautiful: we believe in the love of God for men: nos cognovimus and Credidimus charitati quam habet Deus in nobis (we have recognised the love God has for us, and we believed it) ! »²³

The story of Mercy appears to be centred on fragile beings,

²³ Sermons II 1601.

wounded and vulnerable, small and marginal: a man half dead and a heterodox stranger.

*« Father Blanc would have wished that they spoke of the departure of my Brothers for Guadeloupe in the newspapers. Personally, I do not want to. The works of God grow only in darkness, and it is during the night that dew falls from heaven. »*²⁴

²⁴ To Miss De Lucinière, January 8, 1838.

3. GOD'S NAME IS MERCY

«*Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy* »²⁵ (Matthew 5: 7). To the merciful, Jesus promises nothing more than what they live: mercy. For all other beatitudes the promise contains an addition: those who weep will be comforted; the pure in heart shall see God. But what could God still give to the merciful? Mercy is the fullness of God and human beings. The merciful are already living the same life of God.

"*Mercy*" is an ancient word. During its long history, it is loaded with a rich sense. In Greek, the New Testament language, mercy is called *eleos*. This word is familiar to us by the *Kyrie eleison* (Lord have mercy), the appeal to the mercy of the Lord. *Éléos* is the usual translation in the Greek version of the Old Testament, of the Hebrew word *hésèd*. This is one of the most beautiful biblical words. It is often simply translated as 'love'.

Hésèd , mercy or love, is part of the vocabulary of a covenant. From God's side, it means a steadfast love, capable of maintaining communion forever, whatever happens: "My faithful love will never leave you" (Isaiah 54, 10). But as God's covenant with his people is a story of ruptures and new beginnings from the start (Exodus 32-34), it becomes obvious that such a love involves forgiveness and cannot but be mercy.

Éléos also translates into another Hebrew word *Rahamim*. This word often goes hand in hand with the word *hésèd*, but contains a greater emotional charge. Literally, it means the

²⁵ Cf. *Mercy. Questions of Faith and Bible*. Taizé. Last Update: May 7, 2008.

entrails, the plural of *réhèm*, the maternal womb. Mercy, or compassion, here denotes the felt love, the affection of a mother to her son (Is 49, 15) , the tenderness of a father for his children (Psalm 104: 13), an intense brotherly love (Gen 43, 30).

Mercy, in the biblical sense, is much more than an aspect of God's love. It somehow means *the very being of God*. On three occasions, before Moses, God pronounced his name.

1. The first time, he said: "I am who I am" (Ex 3, 14) . "Modern exegesis has drawn attention to the differences in the understanding of being in the Hebrew and Greek philosophy. In Hebrew thought Being is not a passive entity but dynamic, and means "to be concretely there in an active and efficient manner". Thus the revelation of God's name contains a promise: I am "The one who is there. I am with you, in your distress and I accompany you on the way".²⁶

2. The second time: "I am gracious to those to whom I am gracious (*ahem*) and I take pity on those on whom I take pity (*rahamim*) Ex.33, 19". The rhythm of the sentence is the same as in the preceding sentence, but compassion and mercy replace the being. To God, "*being who he is*" is to have compassion and mercy.

3. This is confirmed by the third proclamation of the name of God : "God of tenderness (*henun*) and pity (*raham*), slow to anger, rich in kindness (*hésèd*) and fidelity (*emits*)" (Ex 34: 6).

a) With the Word as guide

« *When Israel was a child, I loved him. But the more I called, the further they went away from me. I myself taught Ephraim to*

²⁶ Walter Kasper, Mercy. 4th edition. Ed. Sal Terrae. p. 53

walk, and I myself took them by the arm, but they did not know that I was the one caring for them, that I was leading them with human ties, with leading-strings of love that, with them, I was like someone lifting an infant to his cheek, and that I bent down to feed him.» (Hos 11 1a.2a.3)

«When a newborn grasps with his little fist, for the first time, the finger of his mother, he imprisons it forever.» (Gabriel García Márquez)²⁷

The theme of motherhood permits idealising, but it is the physical link that unites us to the story. And with an emotional story and of love. The natural affection of a mother is the affection that is required for life from the first moment of our lives. We need affection, it is an elementary necessity.

Exegetes say that in the text of Hosea appears the figure of the father who provides his son with every kind of care. God acted like this toward Israel, but when he became an adult, he took paths that distanced him away from his father, from God. He made pacts and alliances with other people, because Israel, being a tiny nation, was siding with big and powerful countries. These pacts logically implied acceptance of the lifestyle, including religion, of those with whom he came to terms. By thirst for power or for the sake of survival, it abandoned the "poor God" Yahweh, and it affiliated itself to the strong gods of empires. And now God was left to his absolute solitude. But, being a God of love and mercy, he was still waiting for the return, the impossible return, because returning would have meant entering the political relinquishment. And adherence to Yahweh was not strong enough to risk such a relinquishment. Mercy in

²⁷ This quotation circulating in the world, attributed to the Nobel Prize for Literature Gabriel García Márquez, literally says : "When a newborn grasps with his little fist, for the first time, his father's finger, he holds it as a prisoner for ever. " The author of the quotation is a Mexican, Johnny Welch, in his poem "The rag doll".(La poupée de chiffon").

abandonment, such was the mercy of the God of Israel.

But the verbs used in the text rather have an accent "mother": *"I loved him ... I called him ... I taught him to walk ... carried him in the arms ... took care of him ... all high against my cheek ... leaning towards him ... and given to eat"*. This whole series of care regarding maternal activity. Piety has created the maternal figure of Mary because, perhaps, the paternal figure of God seemed exclusively harsh. But in reality, in God himself, like in all other persons, there is a dose of femininity, and with it, a maternity dose. The imagination can still be difficult to imagine God as a mother, but there are biblical elements that could help in this case.

It seems that the maternal relationship has, when it works well, these two features: mainly to prove what is good in children and underline their successes. In Micah 7: 19, it is said that God throws sins into the depths of the sea because he is totally oblivious of the evil and only takes account of the good. Just as Brother Roger of Taizé said, God is love and only love. This is why he rejoices in the success of human beings, as he does not pretend to succeed at our detriment. The merciful God, as a mother, renounces his divine nature; he wants everything for us.

These are words of a young student. He is at the age when he begins to ask himself questions about the meaning of his life. No stereotyped formulas, but simple, he describes something of the mystery of love and grace that envelopes it. He sees faces and hands that are the signs of something, of someone greater.

During my life, even though I have not lived for long time, I have had the pleasure of knowing very good people. I do not know why, but I find myself in better relationship with adults than with people of my age. It's not that I would have problems with them, on the contrary, thanks be to God, I get on well with everyone in my class and I have never had any problems with anyone in my school .

But I like to join these people who are older than me, because I think they have a lot to teach me. Thanks to this game of bowls, the sport I practice and for which I contest, I got to know a lot of people.

This is a security for me to know that I have a lot of people on whom to count in good and difficult times. For these people, for their unconditional affection, for their mercy toward me, I feel a deep gratitude. I could name people I know they love me, because they show it to me when I'm with them (Ruky. Cristóbal Vicente, Farina...).

In my moments of depression, they surround me, they help me to continue, and sometimes, when I'm sad, it is enough for me just to see these people I like to find joy. I do not forget my family which is with me whenever I need it.

I do not know the reason why so many people love me and why I love so many people at the same time, but I measure how lucky I am to have so many people around me.

That is why I have to give thanks.

b) Pope Francis' word

*« The mercy of God is his loving concern for each one of us. He feels responsible; that is, he desires our wellbeing and he wants to see us happy, full of joy, and peaceful.»
(Misericordiae Vultus, n.9).*

In this deep desire for God, his rights are set aside, the search for a profit on his part does not exist for him, the temptation to compete does not appear. His only reward is our happiness, our appearance and our success. As Jean-Marie said "Our peace is his glory". This is why he is so much interested in us: if we fall, he falls; if we triumph he triumphs. As E. Hillesum said, we must help God not to fail. We must do it by protecting ourselves as he protects us.

c) From Jean-Marie

□ A maternal Christianity

while it has been exclusively paternal and patriarchal. In this era where the patriarchal model has been shattered, we have to think about a maternal believing experience that can be an issue. We can try to imagine of a sensitive, delicate, creator of life, warm God. This question of the poet J. Hierro remains relevant: "How to get into the soul by breaking the ice?" How to make faith warm, and prayer and theology more comforting? How Christian experience should it contribute to our life "freezes" not on this earth? The development of a spirituality of a God merciful mother could possibly help.

The most feminine symbol, that of pregnancy and childbirth, is the icon that Jean-Marie takes and lives. God is a mother whose only desire is to bear us, and put us in the world... his mercy.

« We are still his people, we are the sheep led by his hand. He will listen to our groans, because he is full of kindness, gentleness and

compassion for those who invoke him. And, according to the beautiful thought of St. John Chrysostom, he expects to give birth to his mercy with the same eagerness as an expectant mother awaits the moment of her deliverance.»²⁸

The expression that he would repeat in some missions to incite to take advantage of this time and to propose good resolutions for the future. We cannot give up on responding to the maternal love that he lavishes upon us so abundantly .

« Ecce nunc tempus acceptabile. Here are the favorable days. Woe to him who will let them pass with an impious indifference! Woe to him who will not profit by them! The Church, to use the beautiful expression of St. John Chrysostom, the Church, this holy time of the Jubilee, aspires to bring forth his mercy as a woman at work aspires to the moment of her deliverance. »²⁹

Jean-Marie lived, in himself, the emotional Christianity, a motherly face. When he talks of Providence, he talks only of God himself on whose face care, help, loving tenderness on her sons is read.

« Personally, I like abandoning myself completely to God and to his kind Providence more than ever. I want Her to lead me by the hand, step by step. Then I will not tell Her: "Mother, it is a long way from here and the road is too rough; perhaps you and I will get tired before we reach the end!" She would answer, "My son, have more patience and more courage then. I go from one extreme to the other with force because I do everything with calmness.»³⁰

²⁸ The Father's mandate, Vicar Capitular, 1815.

²⁹ Sermons II 1936.1

³⁰ To Chevalier, May 16, 1837.

❑ Having a deep need of grace:

There is no dishonour to perceive a need of grace. That at the edge of a tiny planet in a corner of a universe that is part of all possible universes, some living beings asking for grace, nothing is more normal. Pardoning is not to make reasonable, something that is done in a judgment. Forgiving is to nourish - welcome - dress - house - provide a refuge - press - save - guide and value.

Any loving care programme. Also let us say that grace and mercy go together.

It is grace that Jean-Marie felt throughout his life. Grace at every moment of every day, Grace in every interprise, especially in hard times - and there were so many - where everything was the cause of discouragement and abandonment.

*« I found myself somewhat despondent for several weeks, so much so, that I did not have the energy to think of anything. Life is very hard in such circumstances. Fortunately everything passes, everything comes to an end, and Providence, after a short period of trials, puts to sleep all our sorrows in her bosom like a tender mother. »*³¹

Feeling oneself helped in a whole unforeseen situation, short as it is may be (in the following case, feeling retained at the Grande Chaplaincy of France to the detriment of his desire to return to Brittany among his own). Realising at all times surrounded and clothed in the maternal mercy, "my good mother".

« Then, let me rest on his bosom like a little child, and when comes the time for waking up I will say to my Mother from the bottom of my heart: Ecce venio ut faciam voluntatem tuam

³¹ Autograph project. AFIC. 39. 595.

(Here I am, I am coming to do your will; Heb 10: 9).»³²

❑ **Memory and forgetting:**

The two things are necessary in life and in the human and fraternal relationship. Memory for not hitting the same stone, to render dignity to the one you wanted to humiliate. Without memory, life becomes dangerously superficial.

And then, forgetting: not to archive offenses, empty the "basket" of the daily frictions that nestle in the heart, remain there and eventually make life bitter. A salutary forgetfulness, generous, offered, not deplacé or superficial. As the prophet Micah says, this is what makes the recovered mercy, which throws away all the past mistakes to the bottom of the sea.

Jean-Marie will castigate in a concise and ironical manner the horror of non-forgetting, of recurrent and permanent memory.

« I love men who have the kind of heart that enables them to forget. It is a horrible thing never to forget.»³³

If among the Brothers there was a reason for quarrelling, if they had some friction, it should be forgotten before night. It is an orientation coming from the hand and heart of the Founder in the first edition of his Rule.

« They will carefully avoid any subject of dispute, showing one another neither aloofness nor bad humour. They will avoid all words that are harsh, bitter or reproachful, all signs of contempt or of impatience. They will speak to each other with an unalterable gentleness, a great modesty, and without using pet names among themselves. If there arose any dissension between them,

³² To Querret, Paris, April 10, 1824.

³³ Memorial 62.

even a light one, they should seek reconciliation before the evening prayer.»

Jean-Marie goes to preside over the funeral eulogy for a deceased Headmaster of a school. All his tender admiration will go to the merciful love of the deceased who appeared to have forgotten all the mistakes of his students. Instead of anchoring them in the past, he opened them to a future of hope.

« I noticed with tenderness the kind of repugnance he used to describe the trouble that some of you caused. When the truth prevented him from overlooking your errors, he tried to excuse them, and if he could not always forgive the past, he hoped to find consolations in your future actions that would prevent him from taking severe measures. I repeat it, and you know it well, you will never know how much he loved you.»³⁴

The works of fraternal aid, are ‘maternal’ works. We must ensure that our relationship patterns are of quality, not the stereotypical quality that feels religiosity, but of that which emanates from the heart. Everything passes: ice and heat, too.

« I mean that, when one of us suffers, we suffer with him. I mean that each one wills the happiness of the other as his very own. I mean that when one of us needs help or consolation in his tasks, the promptitude and the joy with which we shall render him service evidently mark the depth of tenderness that we have one for another.»³⁵

The name of God is mercy. This is his true definition: holiness consists in his love and that is why it is not something that separates us from Him, but something that follows us, like love. His greatness does not consist primarily in its power, but in His mercy, forgiveness and loyalty. Human patience has its limits, that

³⁴ Sermons I 851.

³⁵ End of the retreat of the Society of St. Méen, S VIII 2533-34

God does not have one: that is the difference between Him and us, and this is what surprises us and fills us with admirable fear .

4. JESUS CHRIST IS THE FACE OF THE MERCIFUL FATHER

Concisely, José Antonio Pagola, a theologian and an expert in Christology, gave a central definition of "being Christian".

« Believing in Jesus is not ultimately to confess him, but to follow him. A Christian is someone who believes what Jesus believed, who understands life as Jesus understood it, who struggles for what he struggled for, who approaches those he approached, who defends the causes that he defended, who dies in the hope with which he died.»

Jean-Marie, had said very similar things in a different language:

« When God says he wants our sanctification, it is as if he said that he would like to find in us the perfections of his Son. He wants us to be, in some way, as much as human weakness permits, clothed with Jesus Christ, as the Apostle says. He wants us to follow Jesus Christ in all His ways, to judge everything as He has judged. He wants us to love what He has loved, and despise what He has despised, to hate what He has hated, in a word, that all our thoughts conform with His thoughts, and that we be His living image! »³⁶

So, our sense of life is the communion with its profound experience of God.

The agreement is now virtually unanimous. Jesus of

³⁶ Sermon VIII 2469. *On perfection*

Nazareth was a man, perhaps the only one, who lived and communicated a healthy experience of God, without disfiguring it by fears, ambitions and fantasies that, ordinarily, project the various religions of the divinity.

Jesus never speaks to us of an indifferent or distant God, forgetful of his creatures or interested in his honor, his glory or his rights. At the center of his religious experience we do not find a God "legislator" trying to rule the world by means of laws, nor a God "vigilante" irritated or furious by the sin of his sons. For Jesus, God is compassion. "Entrails", "*rahamim*" would say. Such is his favourite picture.

Compassion is the way of being of God, his first reaction to his creatures, his way of looking at life and people, that which animates all his activities. God feels for his creatures what a mother feels for the son she carries in her womb. God carries us in his womb.

The most beautiful parables that came out of Jesus' lips and which, without doubt, he thought about most in his heart were those he told to make everyone understand the incredible mercy of God.

a) With the Word as guide

« They came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a large crowd, the son of Timaeus (Bartimaeus), one of the beggars, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*" And many rebuked him to silence him, but he shouted all the more, "*Son of David, have mercy on me!*" Jesus stopped and said, "*Call him.*" They called the blind man, saying: "*Have confidence! get up, he is calling you.*" And he, throwing his coat, jumped up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus spoke to him: "*What do you want that I do for you?*" The blind man replied, "*Rabboni, that I may see!*" Jesus said to him, "*Go,*

your faith has saved you." And immediately he received his sight, and he followed him. »

This text is part of the ascent to Jerusalem in which Jesus wants to see that his followers (the one who reads the Word today) understand the meaning of abandonment (Mark 10: 46b-50). It is therefore not necessary to stop the narrative itself. The real blind are those who follow him (us), those who have problems to accept the spiritual dimension of the delivered messianism. They are very attached to the "son of David", the powerful messianism to which they aspire. So they are blind by their desire for superiority, by their self-referential posture (like us). The way to liberate themselves from them is the "compassion" of Jesus and his mercy that re-orient human basics.

So we can understand Jesus' question: "*What do you want me to do for you?*" As the great demand for mercy. Due to this question people perceived that even God put himself at the service and disposition of the poor. It was God himself who asked the man in need. Here is the impact coming from Jesus: Merciful God who envelops the merciful person. God and the person in the same package: mercy.

b) Pope Francis' word

« Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy... Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him.... Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God. »
(Misericordiae Vultus n° 1)

C) Word of Jean-Marie

The mission Jesus received from the Father was that of *«revealing the mystery of divine love in its fullness»* (MV 8) and ours cannot be anything else. True, it is beyond us, but here is his Holy spirit responsible for teaching and training these little

"*substitutes*" that we are, so ignorant and clumsy.

What will be the first step in our learning? The words of Pope Francis light up the path: "*let us fix our eyes on Jesus and his merciful face*" (MV 8), we approach his Gospel and discover how "his relations with people who approached him, help them to see something unique and unheard of". Discover how he looked, how he listened, what were the gestures of his hands ...

We are going to see a few texts from the Gospel where amazing merciful attitude of Jesus appears, then we will see life and we will hear the words of Jean-Marie as a historic realisation of these texts, to leave the text vibrate here and now in our life.

For this exercise, we have to relive the power of the whirl of the Word that Jean-Marie carried in him. We must welcome with gratitude the word of God, let us gently leave ourselves be overwhelmed by it, so that it may penetrate us and manifest its efficacy in us. Our task is only to let ourselves be inhabited by it and to let it bear fruit in us.

*« If Jesus Christ, my dear children, declared that he who hears and keeps his word is happier than the most holy Virgin herself who bore Him in her womb, with what lively gratitude must we listen to the lessons the Gospel gives us! We must receive them as if the Lord were speaking... Let us then open the ears of the heart, so that this word of truth penetrates and nourishes our soul. »*³⁷

The identification of Jesus with the Father was in listening to his "inner voice". In our case, the transforming identification with Mercy will come with prayerful listening to the texts, pondering on them, leaving us overwhelmed by their strength and tasting them interiorly.

« Listen to God in meditation, open the ear of your heart to

³⁷ To the « Congreganists », on Mass, S III, 927-8

his holy words ; find your delight in tasting and savouring them.»³⁸

❑ Getting in touch

*« A man suffering from a virulent skin disease came to him and pleaded on his knees, saying, "If you are willing, you can cleanse me". Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him and said to him. "Be cleansed". »
(Mk 1 : 40-41)*

To cure this leper, a word would have sufficed for Jesus, a word pronounced from afar. His decision to touch him is an expression of infinite compassion and tenderness that also needs to be expressed by contact.

This gesture contravened an important prescription: anyone who would touch a man with leprosy would become impure. This did not seem to matter for him: people are more important than the law, and nobody will take him away from us, from our leprosy, from our stains, from our sins. This is why the people who followed him were not contented with listening and seeing him: they wanted to brush against him, touch him, feel his human warmth and tenderness and feel protected by the clothing of his corporeality. They did not ask for signs, doctrine and teachings: they wanted his touch to make them become clean, healthy and welcome.

We are the **successors** and **disciples** of the **Accessible**, of the Closest, of the Nearest, and our way of seeing His mercy supposes that we know how to make contact with Him, to be available, to eliminate distances, and help people "to feel at ease" .

In a world where the importance of someone is in direct

³⁸ Memorial 18

proportion with the number of barriers that must be overcome to achieve it, we have to show that the doors of the house of our lives are open and anyone can enter, "*enter without knocking*", "*I expect you*", "*Your coming is a pleasure to me*", "*I have prepared coffee and I have time to spend with you*", "*the fireplace is on and my heart too*".

For this, the first step is to build bridges and cross the moat, those outside and, much more than from inside, destroying the distances of the heart and come to understand and confidently share the weaknesses of others.

*« In your relations with men, avoid any kind of singularity. Do not frighten them by too austere an external appearance. Speak kindly to them; try to understand their failings, and, I was on the point of adding, their faults and flaws... We should never be too careful not to crush the bruised reed or extinguish the smouldering wick »*³⁹

No need of extraordinary gestures, joy is enough, and a serene openness.

*« Have a serene countenance; may a sweet gaiety animate your words. Rejoice in the Lord, and follow the counsel of the Apostle: if you notice in one of your Brothers a troublesome disposition to keep aloof and to succumb to melancholy, do whatever depends on you to get him out of a state that is almost always fatal to the soul. »*⁴⁰

❑ **Live attentively**

« And at once, aware of the power that had gone out of him, Jesus turned round in the crowd and said: Who touched my clothes? » (Mk 5: 21-30)

The woman who had a flow of blood approached Jesus

³⁹ Memorial 17-18.

⁴⁰ Rule of 1851,106

stealthily. The whole chain of condemnations exerted weight on her: a woman, impure, ruined by drugs... She wanted to administer, by herself, a healing without anyone noticing it, not even Jesus. Her contact with him reduced to something minimal, like at the frontiers of his person: touching the hem of his garment, avoiding sensitive contact, making an imperceptible gesture avoiding contaminating Jesus. But she was not considering that he was all conscious, fully attentive, to all expectations and all availability, and that his ability to perceive allowed him to capture an unusual touch, even in the midst of the crowd that closely surrounded him.

We are the **successors** and **disciples** of the **Attentive**, the Awakened, the Watchman, the Sensitive, the Connected, and we must educate ourselves to feel others with our five senses. To look at their eyes and guess what they conceal; listen to what they say beyond words, to capture what beats beneath appearances. To vibrate as if we were a photoelectronic cell which reacts to the slightest touch.

The first piece of advice that Father de La Mennais gave himself and which he prioritised in the work of those who were to accompany the others was that of concern:

*«Always remain completely dependent on God's Spirit; never sadden him; be attentive to discover what he wants of you...»*⁴¹

To pay attention, to watch, to be sensitive to those with whom we share the life and the mission is fundamental.

*«I know that your class is doing very well; keep on giving them your best care.»*⁴²

This, because we are mysteriously connected with everybody by essential bonds of life and destiny.

⁴¹ Memorial 15

⁴² To Bro. Alfred-Marie Laborie, November 30 1845.

« Do not consider your vocation only in respect of your own interests, but consider also the essential ties that your state entails regarding the multitude of children whose eternal destiny is, in some way, in your hands. See if you want them to live or if you want them to die, and take note that by pronouncing their sentence you pronounce yours as well. »⁴³

❑ Looking beyond appearances

« They all complained when they saw what was happening. He has gone to stay at a sinner's house.(...)

Jesus said:

Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a

son of Abraham ».(Lk 19: 1-10)

On Zacchaeus weighed like a heavy stone, a reputation that preceded and suffocated him: he was a publican, undesirable, a rich thief, a sinner and above all most insignificant given his small size. But he, dominated by the desire to see Jesus, had assumed the limits of his smallness and exposed himself to ridicule in public. Things went beyond his desire: he wanted to see him, but Jesus wanted something greater: to stay in his house, to have a meal there, to talk ...

In exchange, he offered him a new identity: "For me, you are not a "sinner", you are" a son of Abraham. "All labels, fake names, old appearances disappeared: it was not someone lost, but someone found. Jesus had drawn him from the well where he lay, washed his name of the mud, uncovered the eyes of all his most hidden identity.

We are the **successors** and **disciples** of the **Contemplative**, of the Master of the Tender Look, the Restorer of reputations, the Liberator from prisons, the Breaker of chains, the Creator of new identities, the Judge without any other sentence other than the

⁴³ Brothers' retreat, S VII, 2229-2230.

one that cites love.

His mercy calls us to look at others with eyes of friendship, with looks without judgement or condemnation, able to discover the child who hides behind a hardened adult; to see in the people who approach us unimagined possibilities; to absolutely oppose classifications, chains that rivet the past and sentences that imprison. It summons us to become specialists to remove the labels, remove the covers, open the windows and break locks and chains.

Oil and balm, bruised reed... favourite expressions of Jean-Marie. By his own experience in relationship with all, the Brothers, his brother Féli ... he learned to see beyond the courtesy of people and things, to whole heartedly approach the vital centre of the human being. In cases like the one that follows, he is capable of discovering in a guilty Brother the most intimate truth, even, according to his expression, "in spite of myself" as a revelation given to him. The person thus considered, ceases to be an obstacle to become a reinforcement.

«There will also be Brother Xiste at Tréguier (previously called Olympe) [mentioned in the preceding quotation] that I have not abandoned at all in his misfortune. This Brother was much less culpable than he appeared to be, and he showed me such lively repentance that, in spite of myself, a word of absolute forgiveness came out of my mouth. Never should we speak to him of the past, and we should not at all write to Fougères [his fatherland] that he is at Tréguier. You will have great back-up in him.»⁴⁴

Mercy calls us to go through life with indulgence, with no other judgement than that of love. Father de la Mennais lived thus with his brother Féli as a spontaneous outpouring, though painful, in his heart: the conviction that all have an identity, a value, a dignity of the son of God that nothing and nobody can

⁴⁴ To Bro. Ambroise Le Haiget, March 5, 1831

defile.

«For pity's sake, my excellent and so good friend, do not abandon him. He never speaks about you except with the tenderest respect. And, I have often heard him making remarks about how good and indulgent you were towards him after receiving your letters, and what difference there was between your language so full of calmness, charity and gentleness and the bitter and dry words of some of his old friends who, instead of pouring oil and balm on his wounds, touched them with their iron hand to tear them open. As for me, though I have been blamed, I have always looked for and will always try, despite what happens and what may be said, to convince him of my sincere attachment. However responsible his conduct towards the Church may be, I will not break away from him, because in the long run, I will not cease to be his brother and to love him with all my heart. The only means I have to bring him back to the right path where we used to walk together, and from which he has unfortunately strayed, is to convince him more and more that no other person loves him more than this poor John to whom he has caused so much pain.»⁴⁵

❑ Change your mind and surrender

«I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel (...)

Woman , you have great faith ! Let your desires be granted.»

(Mt 15: 21-28)

How possible is it that Jesus easily changed his mind and posture in a short time and that he accepted to be overcome by the arguments of a foreign pagan? If from the beginning he was so sure of what his Father wanted for him, how could he change

⁴⁵ To M. Le Comte de Senfft, April 10, 1836

his mind and extend his action of salvation to the pagan world? But can we be surprised? He was used to listening to the will of the Father and, on this occasion, he realises that this will is communicated to him through the insistence of the woman. Convinced that His mission was limited to the Jewish world, He discovers, thanks to her, that His mercy must also extend to those who are far from the people of the Covenant. The Father communicated to him through an insignificant Canaanite who then became the bearer of his Word.

Perhaps he marvelled at finding in this woman so deep an affinity with his passion to welcome, include, and sit the marginalised at the table of the Kingdom. She challenged him to cross over the remaining border and she called him from the other side, where there were still different people and the excluded, like sheep lost in the mist. And he knew how to listen to his voice an echo of the voice of the Father, and decided to take the step.

We are the **successors** and **disciples** of the **Flexible**, of the one that we can convince, the Humble, the listener to other opinions, the weak, the Empathetic, the disposed to get out of his own ideas and to discover through those of the others the voices of the Other. Learn from him the flexibility and the ability to accommodate different opinions of his own, not to consider any immovable posture, to be open to God who leaves his voice to be heard beyond the frequencies where we are used to capturing it. We practise an equal listening, without remaining attached to norms and irremovable judgements, willing to move beyond the boundaries to meet the absolute novelty of the free and unpredictable God.

Jean-Marie was always aware that the events that came to him were preceded by a contest of unforeseen and unforeseeable

circumstances.⁴⁶ Also his whole life was a journey of listening to the voice that would direct his steps, the works he was going to undertake, changes of the premises and of life, the mission and the horizons. Always with an agile mind,

«... a soul which is docile and supple in the hands of God»⁴⁷

Like Jesus of Nazareth in the indicated text, Father de La Mennais passed a crucial and decisive moment where he had to abandon his foundation project to let himself be carried away by the Spirit who guides and leads on to absolutely new paths. If for Jesus it is the word of the Syro-Phoenician woman that opened his mission by breaking dikes and borders, for Jean-Marie it is also the voice of the other that made him hear the echoes of the Other.

« Providence allows that it be the government itself, which by all earthly views, pushes us down a path of apostolate: is it not wonderful? What a great mission to fulfil! »⁴⁸

Both in the Gospel and in the concerns of Jean-Marie, the motor that assures movement is mercy. And it is not by coincidence that the founder inspires himself by this Gospel text to explain and give a basis for the educational mission.

« A Brother is sent, as Jesus Christ himself was, to gather the scattered sheep of the house of Israel. »⁴⁹

❑ Respecting the stages

*« Give me a drink (...) .
you knew the gift of God ... » (Jn 4: 1-45)*

During his meeting with the Samaritan woman, Jesus reveals himself as a wise teacher who questions, dialogues, argues, waits, tries to convince, suggests, recognises the truth

⁴⁶ To Querret, 1 March 29, 1814.

⁴⁷ Memorial 119.

⁴⁸ To Father Rohrbacher, January 22, 1837.

⁴⁹ Sermons VII 2322.

that he lives, respects his point of view, he is patient with detours, proposes, discovers for her an inexhaustible source, and gives her a mission.

We are **successors** and **disciples** of the clever **Interlocutor**, the intelligent Strategist, the Respectful that does not skip the steps, the Planner of interpersonal encounters, the Fisherman who waits, the Pastor who calls tirelessly, from the Interested to the interiority of his interlocutors.

We learn from him how to become experts in personal relationships, not to emit moral judgements of disapproval or reproach, to express ourselves to the other in a language that speaks to his heart, not to hurry and to advance in a spiral way, to gradually awaken in him an interest to access “another” source of life in contrast with the old law and external commandments. He has revealed to us the secret source that springs from the depths of each person as good news: that of God the Father who makes us all brothers.

Following the spirit of the master of the well of Sychar, Jean-Marie asks himself - and asks us - about the quality of our accompaniment, about the patient waiting for the "hour" of the other, about the loving search for ways and means of rendering oneself accessible.

« Animated by the spirit of our divine Master, we must equally avoid that soft condescendence which misleads the sinner and that hardness which repulses and discourages him. Goodness gracious! Shall I strike him with my reproaches when you have struck him with your grace? And, when my brother, more unfortunate than guilty, comes to me so that I may console him and heal him, shall I make his wounds bleed instead of pouring the oil and the balm on them? Ah! Far from being irritated by those who resist us, reprimanding them bitterly, shattering the reed that is already broken, putting out the wick that is still smoking, it is

imperative that our word falls like the dew from heaven on the infirm and withering souls. We should soften them little by little, penetrate them gently, so that we can apply to ourselves what Paul wrote to the Thessalonian faithful: I was in your midst as a mother who caresses her children while feeding them: tanquam si nutrix foveat filios suos.»⁵⁰

❑ Welcoming lost lives

« Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic:

- My child, your sins are forgiven. Courage, son, your sins are forgiven (...)

Get up, pick your stretcher and walk.» (Mark 2 : 1-12)

This paralytic had lost mobility, energy and hope. When he was quickly brought down from the roof, Jesus looked at him from below. He was there, waiting for him, like the earth waiting to welcome the seed, to transform it, to make it germinate and be fruitful, like the mother's womb which shelters the life of her son palpitates to ensure his protection, to feed him and make him grow. He was waiting for him to call him "son" and to offer him his true identity. And during the meeting, the stiff and immobile existence of the paralytic sank into this earth, he immersed himself into this tenderness that engendered him and he knew that the one who called him "son" offered him a shelter and a home.

We are **successors** and **disciples** of the life **Generator** of life, of the Communicator of words of encouragement, of the Doctor who renders dignity, strength and energy, of the Remitter of sins, of the New Adam who calls us by our real name: "son".

Like him, we are invited to leave behind our stretchers, with creative audacity to penetrate in his mercy that transforms everything.

⁵⁰ Sermons 1742-1743.

*« I am content with the present without creating dreams about the future. I gather around me like one gathering some debris from a sunken ship; I say I gather a few young people thrown away almost lifeless on the shore by the storm »*⁵¹

*« We are not only sent to the virtuous children and easy to guide, but above all to those who need to be corrected... The poorest and most unfortunate must have our preferences »*⁵²

⁵¹ To Miss de Lucinière, September 3, 1838.

⁵² Notes of Msgr. Maupied, manuscript, AFIC p.308

A testimony among the millions of people " attacked on the way, robbed and left half dead," who cry hoping in the Merciful.

Zanab, her husband, her three children and her parents (the father, aged and very sick in a wheelchair) had to abandon Aleppo because of the war. Practising Muslims, who were cotton traders. But their house was destroyed and there is no going back anymore. Retained in Melilla, they are now travelling to Northern Europe. Again an uncertain destiny .

A war breaks out. You flee. Even if you have planned for it, if you closed your house, sold your property, prepared your luggage, it is a flight. Everything is way. To continue moving forward. You know you will not be able to return. Every morning you have but one idea: to keep moving. Every night I dream of going back. And one day you sleep and you dream no more. And one morning you wake up and you cannot advance any longer. There is the border.

At each border you leave something: first of all, money only: you pay for a safe crossing. At other boundaries, you leave a document, perhaps the passport of your son or your marriage certificate. You call them documents, but they are not only documents, they remind you of who you are. But still come some other borders and you start to lose everything: you lose the money, the papers; you also lose your words, they are robbed. You cannot explain what is happening to you any more. You lose heart ; you lose strength.

On the way you lose your daughters. At the border you lose your little children . I lost my three sons at Melilla. Two months. Two months. It is a flight. You are running away from your house because there is war. You keep moving forward. You continue because you are escaping. You run away from the war to go to Europe. And you arrive in Europe. In Europe too there is a war, a war against the refugees. And you cannot dream any more. You cannot keep on advancing.

5. CALLED TO BE INSTRUMENTS OF MERCY

In Mennaisian spirituality, that of the person Sent is an obvious key: recognising our mission in reference to an Other who, as in the case of Jesus, sends us in his name, letting his presence appear in our works. The principle of our activity, like that of Jesus, will be mercy .

Jesus, in his most moving parables pushes to proclaim a new principle of action. The Jewish society lived according to a requirement formulated in Leviticus: "Be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy" (Lev 19: 2). The people of God must imitate the holiness of the God of the temple; the God who elects his people and rejects the pagans, blesses the righteous and curses sinners, welcomes the pure and entrenches the impure. The ideal is to be holy as God is holy .

Paradoxically, this imitation of God's holiness, understood as a separation from the "no holy" or unclean, generated a discriminating society that excluded pagan and unclean nations. But, in addition, within the chosen people, the priests enjoyed a rank of a superior purity as compared to that of the rest of the people, because they were at the service of the temple where lived the Holy One of Israel. Men were at a higher level of purity than women, always suspected of impurity due to menstruation and their child births. Those who enjoyed good health were closer to God than the lepers, the blind and the crippled,

excluded from access to the temple.

This search for holiness created barriers and some discriminations: it did not favour mutual acceptance, neither fraternity nor communion.

Jesus understands immediately that this religious vision does not meet his experience of a compassionate and welcoming God. He introduced a new principle that changed everything, "Be merciful as your Father is merciful". It is compassion, not holiness that must inspire the conduct of the sons and daughters of God.

Jesus does not deny the holiness of God, but what characterises this holiness is not the separation of the impure. God is great and holy, not because he rejects and excludes the pagans, sinners and the impure, but because he loves everyone without excluding anyone by his compassion. This compassion is the only way of looking at life, to feel with the people and respond to their suffering. Here is the one who brings us closer to the Father of mercy.

a) With the word as guide

« But the lawyer was anxious to justify himself and said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" » In answer Jesus said:

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of the bandits who, having stripped and beat him, made off, leaving him half dead. Now a priest happened to be travelling down the same road, but when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite who came to the place saw him, and passed on the other side. But a Samaritan traveller who came on him was moved with compassion when he saw him. He went up to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He then lifted him onto his own mount and took him to an inn and looked after him. Next day, he took out two denarii and handed them to the innkeeper and said, "look after him and on my way back I will

make good any extra expense you have. Which of these three, do you think, proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the bandits' hands?"

The lawyer replied, « *The one who showed pity towards him* ». Jesus said to him, « *Go, and do the same yourself.* » (Lk 10: 29-37)

Mercy proceeds from three simultaneous movements: of the eyes, of the entrails (the biblical *raham*) and of the hands, head and legs.

- As we have said before, "the merciful is able to see with more depth. First of all, mercy consists in a gaze that reconstructs, inside the merciful person, the moral and spiritual image of the one who arouses in him mercy. "The merciful is capable of seeing that there is a deeper human and truer solidarity than any offense. He believes that there is no fratricide that can annul fraternity. Cain sees Adam again. Purity appears in impurity, beauty in ugliness, light in darkness .

- The guts, entrails, are moved. Mercy involves the whole body, it is a total experience, like the discovery of a newborn. If mercy did not exist, the experience of giving birth would be completely inaccessible to us men. Yet we can have the intuition of this mystery when we give life through mercy. Mercy is experienced and laborious. It is an embodied corporal experience. Therefore, those who know mercy also know indignation. We cannot be merciful without viscerally suffering from injustice and evil around us. With the same entrails that are stirred by indignation and rage for children suffocated in a truck or in the arms of a sea, and tomorrow for the betrayal of a friend in need of forgiveness. Mercy is a blend of gift and virtue. The ability to see the bright side of the heart of another, who continues to be spotless even after the most atrocious crime (a lively part that actually exists, and that remains alive until the last second of our existence,

since, if it did not exist, we would only be demons), this part is not the fruit of our effort. It is pure gratuity. It is a gift of life, our family and the education received in childhood and youth.

- However, mercy also requires effort and virtue, when, after seeing the soul and listened to the entrails, we freely decide that the time for action has come, time to move the legs, hands and the head. Moreover, virtue and effort that always come after the gift of a "flesh heart" and a "look of resurrection", are necessary to maintain and enhance through life this look that tends to mist up over the years.⁵³

b) Pope Francis' word

«Let us not fall into humiliating indifference or a monotonous routine that prevents us from discovering what is new! Let us ward off destructive cynicism! Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism!» (Misericordiae Vultus n° 15).

It is surprising in the text of the Gospel to see the perfect parallelism in the action of the three characters... The priest "saw... and ran off". The Levite "saw... and ran off". The Samaritan "saw, his entrails were moved" ... and he took the risk. The eyes see the same thing, but it is the heart that allows to perceive the novelty of events and people. In addition to the

⁵³ Luigino Bruni. *Misericordia, Cemento di civiltà [Mercy, the cement of the city]*, Avvenire, 06/09/2015.

indifference, it is the excessive familiarity with the pain that anaesthetises us, the noise that makes us deaf and does not let us hear the heartrending cries that reach us.

c) Jean-Marie's word

The traditions concerning Jesus have kept the souvenir of his compassionate gaze on the sick, the lepers, the unbalanced, and, above all, his *compassionate* gaze on the crowds. "So as he stepped ashore he saw a large crowd; and he took pity on them and healed their sick." (Mt 14, 14). And when he saw the crowds he felt sorry for them because they were harassed and dejected like sheep without a shepherd." (Mt 9, 36). Entering Naim he met those who were going to bury the only son of a widow. "Seeing them, the Lord was moved and said, 'Do not cry'."

J.B. Metz said that, faced with the "mystical closed eyes, especially occupied with inner attention, the one who is inspired by Jesus is called upon to cultivate a "mysticism of open eyes" and a spirituality of absolute responsibility towards those who are suffering.

The spirituality of Jesus makes his disciples attentive to the suffering of people. Looking at the face of the suffering liberates us from ideologies that block our compassion or normative frameworks that set our conscience at rest. This look draws us away from indifference, reminding us of our own condition of vulnerability. It awakens in us fraternal solidarity. In almost all spiritual journeys we emphasise the importance of consciousness, attention to the here and now, interior silence ... and rightly so. However, the most effective way to be in harmony with the spirituality of Jesus is to learn to look at the face of the other with compassion.

□ Seeing with the eyes of the heart

Jean-Marie followed a path where reality presented itself for all to see. Some careful reports showed a desolate panorama of

children at the time. There were officials, politicians, thinkers and ministers who also knew the situation. But he, since his childhood, had his eyes open to see beyond things and to discover their meaning.

Talking about Jean-Marie de la Mennais is talking of a man whose view was at the same time wide and deep. Able to see more things, and especially, to see them better, to penetrate reality in order to discover its deepest meaning.

Where others only see anonymous young people, obscure events, shortcomings..., he discovered faces full of life and beating hearts looking for a united response. Thus he advanced in life, eyes always wide open to the world, scrutinising it from all angles, tracking the surprising presence of God who calls and beckons, who invites and happily engages.⁵⁴

This compassionate gaze provoked in him the need to ask God for workers on whom to rely, necessary, just and true to respond to the silent cry of the people.

*« At the sight of such an immense harvest mentioned in the Gospel, I ask you to send workers to collect the harvest: rogate Dominum messis ut mittat operarios in messem suam (pray therefore, that the master of the harvest may send workers to his harvest). Lord, I ask you at the same time to choose from the thousands those whom you will call to do your work. »*⁵⁵

His vision directed him to reflections loaded with a burning passion and chiselled expressions of tenderness. It filled him with enthusiasm to "go forth", him and his disciples, to the most needy from the point of view of the education service.

« At the sight of the multitude of children who call us to help them, who pray and adjure us to have pity on them in their

⁵⁴ Josu Olabarrieta, *The Path-Finder* p. 13.

⁵⁵ Opening of the Brothers' retreat S VIII 2272-73

fate, to save them from death, and from eternal death by which they are threatened, no human interest will detain us; we will introduce ourselves to them, we will take them into our arms, and we will tell them: Dear children that Jesus, our Saviour, has loved so much, that he deigned to embrace and bless, come to us, stay with us; we will be the guardian angels of your innocence; we will be your defenders and your fathers; we will devote ourselves to you; no sacrifice will appear to us too great to save you! »⁵⁶

The ministerial service of the Brothers is meaningless without this compassionate look practised every day by the Reading of the Word (hence the exhortations of Jean-Marie, where quotations or biblical references combine) and in the Re-reading of life to see people and events with the merciful eyes of Jesus himself.

« But when I cast my eye on these pupils gathered by Providence, when I consider the vastness of the needs of this vast diocese, and that I compare them to its resources, my heart is moved and broken, and I am tempted to say to J.C. as to his apostles, in a similar circumstance: quid haec inter tanto? (So little for so many people) »⁵⁷

The first task: to see with the heart. Watching or remaining exposed (as the old photographic films that the "exposition" opened them to the possibility of being impressed and remain forever marked by external images).

□ To feel and have our entrails moved

The disciple of Mercy is credible only by the mercy and tenderness and not the alleged force of arguments or by the importance of works. Finally we render ourselves credible by mercy and tenderness. The rest remain in suspense. For that very

⁵⁶ Sermons VII p. 2271

⁵⁷ Sermons 792.

reason, it should be necessary to recover not only the warmth of the doctrine, but also that of behaviour, looks and concrete actions. If this warmth is rare, if the "cold" persists, would the Christian community render itself credible in this society?

When Jean-Marie thought about the deep roots of the mission of the Brothers, he thought of it as anchored on mercy, because « (God has) chosen you, marked and appointed you to extend his reign, to be the instruments of His mercies »⁵⁸ And that is why this task cannot be done in a committed and joyful way at the same time, if they do not feel their entrails upset, without a tender empathy movement towards the people to whom they are sent.

*« Do you not feel, my very dear Brothers, stirring within you the apostolic zeal? Does not the so expansive tenderness of Saint Paul for Onesimus move your hearts? And do not you hear ringing in your ears the touching supplications that the great apostle addresses to Philemon, for the dear son he had given birth to in his chains? Already these 300,000 slaves, are they not as dear to you as your own entrails (Philemon 1: 12), as children, as brothers? »*⁵⁹

We can seek and pursue justice in a committed way, but if we do not let ourselves be affected, touched and put ourselves in their place, this action is dry and tasteless.

« (Previously) we did not know this dreadful selfishness that makes man foreign to man, who dries all sources of sensibility, and draws from the miserable up to the consolation of being pitied! So... everyone was eager to take part in all kinds of good works; devoting time to it; taking care of it; and being intirely there. Ah! we can and so we must say, nowhere did we find the love of public goods more

⁵⁸ Sermon 2229

⁵⁹ Sermons 2577 bis.

ardent and more enlightened: in any other city we saw a more intelligent and active charity. But at this word charity, my entrails are moved.»⁶⁰

To feel the emotion of our own entrails and ask forcefully, require entrails in relationships, gestures and actions: entrails at school and not only academic excellence, entrails in banks and not only accountability, entrails at the borders to pass without fear, entrails for an always cold humanity, requiring that the entrails of the earth are not deserted, to open doors and hearts to hope for another possible world. According to the strong word of Jean-Marie, “life depends thereon.”

«My Brothers, will you not have pity on the poor? Do not their piercing cries move your bowels? Think, think that their fate is in your hands and that at the moment I am speaking to you, they are waiting with painful anxiety the effect that the word of God will produce on you; pronounce then: Do you want them to die? Do you want them to live? We want them to live ! »⁶¹

All the spirituality of mercy gets blocked when someone withdraws into himself as in a unique living environment. Mercy requests that one gets out of himself, opens up in order to share common experiences. And all this, not from an alleged moral superiority, but from the most basic human brotherhood.

«So let us put on, brethren, a heart of compassion, and to excite us to imitate the virtues of St. Vincent de Paul, let us like him understand well what the poor are in the eyes of faith »⁶²

⁶⁰ Sermons 1074.

⁶¹ Sermons 1080.

⁶² To M. Hay, July 7, 1807.

❑ To move the hands, the feet ... to the rhythm of the heart .

The path of mercy is a path of realisation. We can be happy by serving. It is not only the other who benefits from it. What is more properly mine, my reason for living in the world and the meaning of my itinerary also benefits. It is even necessary to think that the commitment resulting from mercy is the outcome of some "benefits". If we do not put our finger on them, it is that there is still a way to go for us.

The words of Jean-Marie are here grouped in a brief inventory of thousand situations where implementing our resources, our hands, our feet, our words, our time... A whole network of places where to go with a compassionate openness.

Hunger, the need of bread in the real sense of the word.

*« It is a teaching of faith that Jesus is hungry, that He is thirsty, and we are aware that Christians are ready to leave Jesus-Christ die of hunger, they won't even give him a glass of cold water (Mk 9:41). And even if there are about to enter eternity they will not yet understand his warning. Jesus will repeat it to them and they will be surprised; they will ask him: "Lord, when did we see you hungry and thirsty?" (Mt 25) My God this makes me shudder. »*⁶³

The poor, who benefited from the express preference of Jean-Marie.

*« Even if we had lost our case, we would not have sent away the poor: they are sacred to us! »*⁶⁴

Attention to specific patients in our community whom we must put in the rank of sacred realities.

*«... but the sick are res sacra.»*⁶⁵

⁶³ Memorial 86.

⁶⁴ À travers la correspondance VI 157.

⁶⁵ To Ruault, November 27, 1835.

The educational mission lived as a ministry of healing, like Jesus in his itinerant life in Galilee

*« A school is a hospital: all children are sick, but, the more they exercise your patience and love, the greater your merits, and your reward is rich in heaven. Therefore do not be discouraged: but rather redouble your zeal in a spirit of faith. »*⁶⁶

Those deprived of employment, therefore of resources and the meaning of existence.

*« My Brothers, work is the most beautiful of all alms giving! Work! That's the secret of Providence; I want to say that it is the means Providence uses to multiply the resources. What better thing can we do than to offer those who lack food the means of acquiring it and a useful occupation? »*⁶⁷

New forms of poverty, new horizons in our educational work, new paths to explore.

*« Your instructions to adults; your visits to two neighbouring houses in Basse-Terre and in prisons cannot but produce a greater good: therefore continue with zeal so great a good: I join you to pray to God to bless your works. »*⁶⁸

The lack of consideration of the distances in the exercise of mercy toward those who are near and those far away, unknown and yet very present, residing in the heart.

*« I want to know what happened to the prisoner who wrote you such a touching letter of which you gave me a copy in January. - If he is still in prison, and he has continued to behave well, I would try to be useful to him. »*⁶⁹

⁶⁶ To Bro. Henri-Marie Martial, November 2, 1851.

⁶⁷ Sermons 1074.

⁶⁸ To Bro. Hyacinthe Le Fichou, April 8, 1845.

⁶⁹ To Bro. Hyacinthe Le Fichou, September 27, 1847.

Here is the testimony of a female teacher in one of our schools. Attentive, even more, passionate in her desire to live the core values of a school that is Mennaisian. At the centre, mercy. Better to let her say a word, authentic and profound, a word that speaks of the daily commitments, of freedom in the words and in the gestures.

"Everyday I will sing of the mercy of the Lord." I still believe in hearing my mother singing this melody. How I loved to hear it! At that time I did not understand the meaning of these words. Now, as the years pass by, the experience, and the little or great wisdom of the road travelled, have taught me something of these beautiful words and I surprise myself more than once to sing them.

Pope Francis and his proclamation of the Holy Year, has raised Mercy to the "top level" of the current values. Only a man like him could make so many men and women, believers and non-believers wonder about the meaning of the word. We hope that this may not be a transitory way, but a vital option for ourselves and for others in this social context that is increasingly becoming complex and to which we are all moving.

When I talk to my students about the three great monotheistic religions, I remind them that MERCY is the first attribute of the one God and because of that we are in spiritual harmony with our Jewish and Muslim brothers. It appears to me that it is important to allow them keep in mind what unites us rather than what separates us.

We are used to explaining what this word means; but I think the best explanation is through my own actions towards them.

I like hearing the words of the Pope when he says that the maternity of the Church is made visible through our own acts of mercy. I will say that it's the maternity of God which moves us to bring him forth by our words, our actions, the manner of entering into relationship, etc.

That is why I try to be attentive to my way of entering the classroom, to greet them and to begin the day. I am concerned about those who are weaker, I try not to treat them all in the same way, in the sense that I take into account the needs, skills and

forms of learning that are not the same for all. I oblige myself to be just and fraternal in my corrections, to "defend them" when I think that the rigidity of some educators, or that of certain ways of doing or that of the educational system itself, deprive them of the opportunities to grow or even impede their life plans.

I remember in particular the piece of advice of an experienced teacher in the field of mentoring. It was during an evaluation meeting. I defended the case of a student by appealing to human feelings of the teaching staff. I did not do this to give the student what he had not merited, but to arrive at a balanced decision with respect to his comrades. This teacher told me that I was too passionate when defending this student, and that I should not forget that students and their families will leave the school, but my colleagues, will remain and that it is with them that I should be in good terms.

I thanked him for the piece of advice, but I absolutely do not agree with it. I always try to be on the side of the weaker. This is not cronyism , but since long time ago there has been an inner voice that continually pushes me to seek what is best in every situation and in every person.

It's not relaxing, but I really feel increasingly filled with this word that keeps coming up in my life, as regards my son, my husband, my parents, my students, and even myself:

"Merciful like the Father."

CODA

Thus began the book:

« Be merciful in order to
obtain mercy yourself.»

Thus, did he equally pretend to conclude. But within the formulation of Jean-Marie: « Be merciful in order that you may obtain mercy yourself » and that of Pope Francis in *Misericordiae vultus* « we are called to live mercy, because we were initially shown mercy », appears a substantial difference.

Jean-Marie, in a compressed reading, it would appear to suggest that we live by mercy because that would be a way to obtain mercy, mercy seen as an end. This could be interpreted as an interested mercy. Pope Francis, however, tells us that life is compassionate because it springs from the inexhaustible source of God's Mercy.

It is also the beatitude of Jesus: « Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy ».

By dint of being nuanced, deepened, explained, life can escape us, and importantly, the decisive thing is to let ourselves be crossed over by the mystery of Mercy. In the first book of *Lamennais Studies* No. 1 (page 5) we read: « *Precisely, one of the*

great difficulties we have in life was expressed by one writer as 'epistemology of the hunter'. » It means getting out with the gun of knowledge and reason, with the intention to attain the object, to apprehend it. However, the experience of God demands the opposite attitude: It is necessary to leave oneself be fertilised and surprised. It is a question of letting oneself be grasped and known. We let this experience be realised within ourselves. »

With the Mercy of God we will do the same.

Letting ourselves be enveloped by Mercy

In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of
death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

God pronounces my name every day and indicates to me my
task.

A name that makes me responsible, a task that humanises
me.

Living awake, it is to recognise that I was created to live this
day
by learning to see and to contemplate;
to see the real and to contemplate its heart.

To feel at every moment the mercy of God,
which he dispenses to me by hands, gestures, words and
times of silence,
him, beside me, asking for a little bit of attention
to be able to hear, feel, taste the voices and signs that come
to me

and are demanding for attention and mercy,
the same mercy that He offers to me in the morning.

A risky task, difficult and painful sometimes,
that of living off centre from me,
exposing to the elements my heart, my time and emptiness,

to the breath of the other, the poor and the little ones.

But there is nothing more satisfying, more tasty,
because in everything the fullness that prepares your Mercy is
rendered present:

you make me grow every moment in love
that will be, which is about to be, a greater LOVE,
far reaching, more definitive and more inexplicable.

Mercy

matrix : in it we are born every day,

way : in it we pass all the days,

destiny: the goal to which we are all called .

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