



**“MAY THE INNER MAN IN YOU
BE STRENGTHENED”**

(Eph 3, 16)

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Copy from a fresco, Saint Paul's Basilica, Rome

INTRODUCTION

“The spiritual life must have first place in the programme of Families of consecrated life,” says Vita Consecrata (n° 93). Consecrated persons who are also educators have an additional reason to be attentive to the inner voice of the Spirit since they are called upon to foster in children and young people careful listening to the divine Master.

In fact, we can say with Madeleine Daniélou¹, that *“education must strive to enhance spiritual energies... Placing*

¹ Madeleine Daniélou (1880-1956), Cardinal Daniélou's mother, foundress of the Apostolic Association of Saint Francis Xavier, an association of consecrated women through one vow, at the service of education. She wrote *L'éducation selon l'Esprit*, Plon, 1939.

emphasis on the formation of the spirit is an act of faith in man ... Nurturing in children the ability to discern will allow them in the course of their life always to preserve and reinstate a sound hierarchy of values". Amazed by an observation from philosopher Bergson: "There are too few saints", Madeleine Daniélou declared: "I understood, I realised that Our Lord had chosen me to be an apostle, an instrument of his reign, that I ought to give myself without reserve, give my time, my work, my prayers, my blood; souls are redeemed at the cost of our lives. I said yes with all my soul to the call of Jesus, I promised to serve him and I trusted that he would perfect his work in me."²

It is not our intention here to deal with the Mennaisian educator as such, save in small strokes. Rather, we shall attempt to enter the very heart of that vocation through listening to the Master within. However, it is important from the outset to recall the vital links that exist between our life in the Spirit – the spiritual life – and our educational mission. In this regard, the example of Madeleine Daniélou is noteworthy. What she discerned is so very close to our two founders' spiritual experience: a call from God, an understanding of education which seeks to open the heart of children to the action of the Spirit, the unique role of the educator who must have travelled the road to holiness if he wishes to answer the call to the mission entrusted to him.

Having gone through such a vital experience, one need not question one's unity of life any longer. Harmony has been attained as all the energies of will, love and intelligence tend toward a single goal, namely, education according to the Spirit.

It is our intention, therefore, in the following pages, to allow ourselves to be challenged by what constitutes our primary mission, that of meeting Christ, the perfect man, listening to him

² Xavier Dufour, *Enseigner, une œuvre spirituelle*, Parole et silence, p. 221

so we can learn to live humbly in his presence. Schooled by him, we can then invite young people and adults to do the same.

We shall see how the “inner man”, in keeping with Paul’s meaning, may be transformed into the likeness of Christ, the perfect man.

We shall rediscover that the Brother’s vocation leads to total self-giving. To be in the likeness of Christ means we can say: “Here I am, O God, to do you will.”

We shall see that, in order to foster within us the growth of the “inner man”, to give rise within us to the dynamism of the Spirit, our life must be one of total trust in Providence and of undivided quest of the Father’s will.

Having realised that it is all too easy to turn a deaf ear to the calls of the Spirit, we shall attempt to understand what constitutes sustained vigilance, interior prayer, and the humble following of Christ.

Lastly, we shall have another look at the wealth of means at our disposal to strengthen the inner man within us. “*When the Church approves a form of consecrated life or an Institute, she confirms that in its spiritual and apostolic charism are found all the objective requisites for achieving personal and communal perfection according to the Gospel.*”³

³ *Vita Consecrata*, n° 93

1

THE WAY OF THE HEART

1) THE INNER MAN

When Jesus talked to the crowds, he spoke with authority. He did not use abstract or erudite language. He spoke in parables, borrowing numerous images from everyday life. Using enigmatic language, he gave rise to questions. He could even be provocative to the extent that his words could be as sweet as honey while “*the stomach was made bitter*” (Ap 10, 10). He thus invited one and all to open their heart to full understanding.

In order to reach God in our inner selves, we must learn to hear the Word as Elijah did, in “*the sound of a gentle blowing*” (1 K 19, 12), not in the wind and storm. Only benevolent and loving listening can foster inner watchfulness and allow us to discern God’s passing through, without which impressions risk overrunning our minds, cursory feelings and superficial ideas take over, while we remain deaf to the calls of the Spirit. Inner harmony is not easy to achieve as we are all too often led by our fleeting emotions. The apostles themselves found it hard to understand their Master. Only through a later assessment of events did they grasp the meaning of his words.

Commentaries and arguments are therefore of no use if we cannot decipher the internal message of Him who has made his abode within us. Our heart, this inner sanctum whence interior light shines forth, is “*the most precious part of ourselves*” (Cassien, Inst., V, 21).⁴ The Spirit of God is the only one who can enter our heart to reveal to our spirit the secrets of God’s heart.

“*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man*” (Eph 3, 14-16). What is this “inner man”? Paul is here speaking about the heart of man, not only about the seat of affections and of spiritual life, but equally about the “*centre of the human being, the root of the active faculties of mind and will..., the locus of grace and of sin... He is referring to the core of man.*”⁵ And Paul continues: “*May Christ, through this Spirit, dwell in your hearts through faith; so that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ*

⁴ Quoted in *Chercher Dieu*, Sister Marie-Ancilla, Coll. Source de Vie, p. 25

⁵ Sister Marie-Ancilla, *Chercher Dieu*, p. 25

which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God” (Eph 3, 17-19).

The expression “inner man” then refers to the abode of Christ, where the personal encounter with God takes place. This is where we “comprehend” – to use the Pauline expression – “the love of Christ”. It is not a question of an abstract or intellectual knowledge, but of a knowledge enlightened by faith through which we may receive, as in fragile clay vessels, “all the fullness of God”. He alone can work within us “*abundantly beyond all that we ask or think*” (Eph 3, 20).

There is no unity of life, no fullness of life, without this personal “experience” of God’s knowledge. Such an experience can only be had through opening up to the Word: How are our hearts moved by the Word? Such an experience will lead us to contemplation: Are the eyes of our heart set on God alone? Such an experience is like a perfume: Are we disposed to discern the grace of the Spirit who, upon visiting with the inner man, pours in him the fragrance of his ineffable love?

“O poor soul of mine, when shall you be baptised in the Spirit? When shall he pour upon you his lights, his peace and all the wealth of his glory?”⁶

At the very core of our being, at the core of the inner man, we gain an awareness of how God lives in us without imposing himself upon us. It is the strength of that presence which we are looking for, ever since we set out on the road with Christ. And we relentlessly pursue our quest of God. We may at times have to make our way back after having wandered astray, lured away by false gods. This is why, from the very outset of spiritual life, formation of the heart, in the sense we mean it here, is of vital importance. “*It is the inner life which is the crucial foundation; formation starts from within and works its way outwards,*” writes

⁶ John Mary de la Mennais, *Memorial*, p. 70-71

Edith Stein.⁷ For educators, such comments are worth more than gold.

The question of interiority is not optional; it is vital. Education to the knowledge of the inner man and to openness of heart can only be had through personal experience. Let us follow this journey together.

2) THE EXPERIENCE OF DIVISION

Everyday living shows us that we all too often do not do what we would like to do and that we do what we would wish to avoid. Daily concerns often eclipse the lights we have received on the occasion of retreats or at the heart of our mission or during personal prayer. Experience teaches us that good intentions falter under the weight of habit or under the pressure of events.

In fact, we experience division: on the one hand, there is what we would wish to be or the image we would wish to display to others; on the other, there is what we are or the image that we actually project. We are reluctant to face up to our weaknesses and to our wounded selves. Our self-esteem is rather deficient, and because of low self-esteem, we do not achieve the inner harmony without which we cannot truly and fully be ourselves.

“An Egyptian saint, whom Arsene questioned one day to get the holy man’s advice on his own thoughts, told him: ‘Abba, how can you who are so learned in Greek and Latin seek advice on your own thoughts from such an ignorant and boorish man as

⁷ Interview, by Zenit, of Éric de Rus, author of the book *Intériorité de la personne et éducation chez Édith Stein*

*me?’ Arsene replied: ‘I admit that while in the world, I acquired knowledge of these two languages, but since I have left it, I still haven’t mastered the alphabet of the ignorant and the boor’.*⁸ Are we acquainted with the alphabet of our personal existence? Are we as ignorant as this Egyptian saint?

Like our contemporaries, we are so fascinated by the powerful appeal which ever more astonishing technological advances exert upon us that we run the risk of walking out on our hearts without realising it. Homecoming is not so easy after we have been blinded by the false glitter of such promising innovations.

We must assess at their true value the immense advantages that can be drawn from the new technologies in communication. However, we must also recognise the temptations to which we are confronted, the pure and simple denial of which would be dishonest. If it is not fitting to blame all external influences for getting in the way of a return to our inner selves, we should be totally transparent about the way we exercise our will and our free choice for or against a life that ought to be more and more Christ-centred. In this age of communication, have we lost the key that opens relationships with ourselves, with others and with God?

*“For a monumental struggle against the powers of darkness pervades the whole history of man. The battle was joined from the very origins of the world and will continue until the last day, as the Lord has attested. Caught in this conflict, man is obliged to wrestle constantly if he is to cling to what is good, nor can he achieve his own integrity without great efforts and the help of God’s grace.”*⁹

⁸ J. Brémont, *Les Pères*, p. 529-530 (Quoted in *Chercher Dieu*, Sister Marie-Ancilla)

⁹ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, 37, 2

One of our main battles is, without any doubt, that which we must wage against untruthfulness. If we wish to fight against this inner division which nibbles at our peace and exacerbates life's inflicted wounds, there is no choice but to wage war on the lie that weakens our will to do good. For as long as we are happy with half-truths, we will never distinguish truth from falsehood. Our life's prospects will dim to the point of drifting into darkness so that we will do what we wish to avoid doing and avoid doing what we would very much wish to do.

How then can we recover interior harmony? Who can help us acquire the science of true discernment and the wisdom of a firm will? Saint Paul, possibly: "*And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God*" (Ph 1, 9-11).

This, in fact, is a true life programme that can help us obtain the true science of discerning God's work in us, this refined insight which makes us see what is good and true, this maturity which opens us up to the total gift of self to the praise and glory of God, this clear-headedness about ourselves so we can seek freedom from our own untruth. However, we know from experience that lasting commitment in the footsteps of Christ is beyond purely human strength; relying solely on our own selves is a sure guarantee of failure in the medium to the long term. To achieve success, we must build on the foundation stone which fosters in-depth living and forge ahead while leaning on God alone.

3) MAN'S ULTIMATE PURPOSE: A VITAL QUESTION

Éric de Rus, in an article which appeared in the periodical *La Vie spirituelle*¹⁰ admirably presents the foundations of the Christian experience based on what Edith Stein has to say about it. For him, mystics, “*these adventurers of the life within*” “*have explored the life of the soul through the experience of inner prayer*”..., a prayer “*which concerns man,*” in the words of Edith Stein. She writes: “*Prayer is the noblest activity of which man is capable.*”

This brings us to the question of the very meaning of our existence, of “that for which” we live. In fact, how can we speak of interiority, of the life within, without referring to the always loving and active presence of God? What does that presence within tell us about man? There is no possible inner life without Hope and there is no Hope without inner life, without reaching out to the very heart of our being where meeting with the eternal God takes place. In the light of that experience enlightened by the Word of God, the life of man proves to be a journey, a becoming, an adventure towards the attainment of that Day which will have no end. Éric de Rus notes that man is a “traveller”. Man is called upon to discover that his existence cannot fully blossom without an ontological dependence on God.

We cannot be satisfied with establishing a world of brotherhood and of justice, a world of peace, the meaning of which would be limited to the here and now. We must in all humility recognise the Author who holds everything together. We must acknowledge the Source of the world, and its purpose. In the words of Elisabeth of the Trinity: “*In the light of eternity, the soul sees the true purpose of things.*” The Kingdom which we are constructing and for which we are giving our life and educating people cannot make do with a purely earthly vision of things. The purpose of existence

¹⁰ Éric de Rus, « *La prière intérieure et sa portée anthropologique* » in *La Vie spirituelle*, n° 775, May 2008, p. 136

reveals to man what his full Vocation is, namely, life in God in his eternity of love and glory. The Holy Spirit alone can shed light in the innermost recesses of our being so that we may glimpse at the inexhaustible riches of our destiny.

We shall forever be dissatisfied if we do not live that deep-seated experience, if we cannot marvel at this epiphany of existence. We shall never be happy in our vocation as Brothers without grasping from within the blessing of a life “in progress” adjusted “to God, forever, in love”. We shall not be educators after the example of John Mary de la Mennais as long as we do not invite young people to gaze upon the Source that is the source of happiness in God.

Such thoughts are not the prerogative of mystics. Rather, let us say that we are all called upon to be mystics. The ultimate purpose of our life is God. “*God has created the souls of men for himself,*” says Edith Stein. “*His will is to unite them to himself and to offer to them in the here and now the infinite fullness and beatitude of his divine life which no one can attain on his own. Such is the goal to which he leads them and towards which they also should strive with all their energies.*”¹¹

¹¹ Quoted in *La Vie spirituelle*, n° 775, May 2008, p. 137

FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION:

- Does unity of purpose in my life stem from a will that is totally God's?
- Which Word from the Bible nourishes me most and gives meaning to my life?
- In my life as a Brother, what is the clearest manifestation of my consecration to God?
- What, in my life, prevents me from being totally honest with myself?
- In the educational mission, how can I help young people to open up to the Spirit of the Lord, and to acquire self-knowledge?



2

MAN, IMAGE OF THE TRIUNE GOD

1) A DISFIGURED IMAGE

a) MAN, GOD'S CREATURE

“But what is man? About himself he has expressed, and continues to express, many divergent and even contradictory opinions. In these he often exalts himself as the absolute measure of all things or debases himself to the point of despair. The result is doubt and anxiety.”¹²

¹² Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, 12

The Council was echoing the psalmist's wonder: "*What is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than God, and You crown him with glory and majesty! You make him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet*" (Ps 8, 5-7).

When considering the nature of man, the Council asserts that the divine Revelation provides an answer. We are familiar with this teaching: "*Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...*" (Gn 1, 26). Like father, like son, somehow. Such is a man's, a woman's vocation, such is the call they received as they were given life: to become an image of God, increasingly replicating the divine model.

For the Fathers of the Church, the division of the world was not, as their language would sometimes lead one to believe, between the intelligible world and the tangible and material world, but rather between the Uncreated and the created, between the Creator and the creatures.¹³ Man in the unity of his being, body and soul, has received a totally gratuitous gift, an incomparable gift which is a call to be in the likeness of God, to be like him. Man has been created capable, through participation, to be image of God. With his body and soul, man is called to be the image of the Image who is Christ, the Word of God, as attested particularly by Saint Irenaeus of Lyons.

The inner self comes to fullness through the unity of his being. The vocation of one and all integrates all the dimensions of a person and can only find fulfilment in communion with other persons. This is not a fusion which might lead to confusion, but a communion in the Body of Christ. Humanity is not a "*gathering of individuals led by instincts and subject to the law of the*

¹³ Cf Placide Desille, *L'anthropologie chrétienne à la lumière des Pères*, in *Christus*, n° 19, 2003, p. 37

jungle".¹⁴ The personal destiny of every man is eternal communion with other persons. It is sin which tends to reduce him to the status of an individual, but the full communion which man is called to will only find its accomplishment in his eschatological condition. *"It is this eschatological condition which was premier in God's design. It is this condition that God intended when he created man, and progress in the spiritual life is seen as a gradual restoration of this 'true nature' of man, like a foretaste and a pre-figuration of the future glory."*¹⁵

Every man possesses this personal dignity, whether it be the poor we turn away from on our way, or the person whom we chase away as a thief, or the prisoner who is despised and forgotten, or the handicapped whose deformity masks the image of God in our eyes, or the human embryo that is reified for selfish motives – to all of them belongs this fundamental dignity. Our mission as educators is to give the "little ones" the clear vision of that beauty which moves them to the core of their being and which they are called upon to manifest to the world. For this to happen, we ourselves must have a clear vision of that beauty.

*"The dignity of the person derives from his having been created in the likeness and in the image of God. It is therefore the splendour of his being in the image of God [...] which gives man his dignity and inviolability [...]. This means [...] that we need to be deeply rooted to survive and that we should never lose sight of God if we do not wish our human dignity to fade away."*¹⁶ *"The spirit is not a by-product of matter..., man is not an animal; rather, he is the image of God, born to know, witness, love and worship."*¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 40

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 39

¹⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Conférences sur l'Europe dans sa crise de la culture* (2005)

¹⁷ Éric de Rus, *L'art d'éduquer selon Édith Stein*, Cahier d'études steiniennes, n° 1, Cerf, ed. Camel Ad Solem, p. 17

b) THE SEDUCTION OF SIN

“Although he was made by God in a state of holiness, from the very onset of his history man abused his liberty, at the urging of the Evil One. Man set himself against God and sought to attain his goal apart from God,” says Vatican Council II.¹⁸ Man refused to recognise God as his beginning. He refuses to be a creature. In so doing, “man has disrupted his proper relationship to his own ultimate goal as well as his whole relationship toward himself and others and all created things”.¹⁹

The Tempter, for his part, wishes nothing better than to turn man away from God, deceive him, control him and tamish in him the image of God which is at the core of his being, as has been said above. “The spirit of evil is not an idea and we must take seriously what Jesus says in this regard; this is but Gospel realism. The spirit of evil is a ‘tempter’, he is not a temptation; he is the ‘prince of this world’. But he has been vanquished” (Madeleine Delbr el).

To sin is to miss the mark, to fall short of the target, to blind oneself. As a result, we do not know ourselves in truth, we are incapable of reading the signs of the Spirit and of seeking refuge within, there to meet the Author of life. “Sin is this great infirmity which keeps humanity from true joy.”²⁰

Virtues, on the other hand, are the thousand mirror images in man, both human and divine, of God’s beauty, gifts of God and fruits of human effort. Sin diverts from God’s beauty and gives rise to vices which shroud conscience and sidetrack from the good.

¹⁸ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, 13

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Jean-Marie Aubert, *Recherche scientifique et foi chr tienne*, Fayard, 1966, p. 100

How then can we set our sights on God? How can we restore what has been divided in us, what has escaped through our own fault, through faint-heartedness and through selfishness? The edifice of our spiritual life, which has been weakened by sin, by numerous compromises and self-interest, needs consolidating. However, we are not alone in this renovation work. The Master of the project has sent along his Son as architect. Let us follow his instructions.

2) A RESTORED IMAGE

a) IN THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST

Jesus, perfect man and Son of God, is the perfect image of the Father. When we look upon him, we see the Father. When we follow him, we go to the Father. When we imitate him, we witness to the Father's love.

Of course, all of this is impossible when left to our own devices. We cannot, by ourselves, move against the current of the troubled waters on the river of our life and of the world. No one comes by God's love without God's help. He it is who sustains our rowing upstream and prevents us from going adrift.

Who among us has not, at one time or another, felt weighed down by his weakness? Had it not been for a helping hand, what would have become of us? Whoever wishes to prevail will find God standing by to uphold the will and guide faltering steps.

Conforming to the crucified Christ

Through their experience and writings, the Fathers of the Church show us the way to the heart and invite us to turn toward

God. But they go even further: they propose a therapy for developing virtues in us. *“At the very start of the itinerary, deny your self, your judgements, your will, your ways of seeing and of appraising in order to conform them to Christ’s.”*²¹ It is not a matter of fighting vices but of acquiring virtues. Our willingness to conform to the crucified Christ must be seen as a positive resolution to move towards an authentic conversion. Mortifying ourselves and carrying our cross are attitudes that are motivated by a free and joyous desire to *“reproduce the image of our Lord when he was nailed on the Cross for us”*²² for *“whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me”* (Mt 10, 37).

Sin does not have the last word. It has been vanquished by Christ on the cross. Therefore, our fight against sin can only succeed if our gaze is fixed on the Beloved Son in order to be in his likeness. *“We are like a garden. It is of no use pulling out thistles, vices, if we do not, at the same time, sow good seeds, virtues. Otherwise, thistles will grow back very fast and the garden will remain unproductive!”*²³

We are called upon, therefore, to contemplate within us the beauty of the divine image which we are asked to reproduce. It is the inner man, wherein dwells the Spirit, who firmly directs his powers and his gaze in the one direction, namely, the Son, Jesus crucified, seated at the right hand of the Father. Only then can such contemplation give him strength to reproduce the infinite love which he feels for all his brothers. It is this prolonged gaze, this everyday contemplation, this sustained heart-to-heart talk that will uphold our will to put on Christ.

“Not my will but yours.”

So as to reproduce in us his image, we must inevitably experience in our body and spirit the struggle which wrenched from

²¹ Sister Marie-Ancilla, *Chercher Dieu*, p. 89

²² Cassien, Inst. IV, 34

²³ Ibid. p. 90

John Mary de la Mennais these words which he often reminded his Brothers: “*Not my will, but yours be done.*”

Such an attitude can lead us to a profound steadfastness which is the benevolent indication of the work of the Spirit and which prompts us to humble listening and selfless service to others.

“Christ himself repaints his distorted portrait in us, but full restoration is not done without our cooperation. He has provided the right brush and the appropriate colours, the paschalmystery. It is up to us to handle the brush while allowing him to guide our hand. It is through our virtuous action that his likeness achieves perfection. Does not the Lord himself tell us when inviting us to be like the Father: ‘You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect’?”²⁴

As has already been said, this is not a one-day trip. After he has helped the little children that we are to walk, God asks us to shoulder ever heavier burdens. In this way, he educates our free will for greater struggles against the enemy, and the struggle may be quite difficult at times. We may be tempted to give up the fight on the way, but with the grace of God we can pick ourselves up and be on our way again.

To reproduce the image of the Beloved

Real growth on our part rests on nobody else’s decision but our own. But in all of this, we can count on the Holy Spirit at work in our heart. Gradually, we shall learn the secrets of total self-giving to the Father and to men, our Brothers and, first and foremost, to the little ones among them who are his beloved. We may have to go through the night of faith but our struggle to acquire true love and to steer clear of self-seeking will have prepared us for this phase in our following of Christ.

Through our “poor and amazing faces” will glimmer the light that shines on the face of the Beloved and the glow of the fire that

²⁴ Ibid. p. 34

burns in the heart given up for love, for it is at the core of our being that the energies of the Spirit are born, not in our imagination and in the intellectual constructs of our stunted spirits. The light of the Spirit shines on our faces to the same extent that his love dwells in our hearts.

Paul Baudiquey, whose description of Rembrandt's works is second to none, writes these words which are an invitation to become "*Icon of the Invisible*": "*The face tells our story, veiling and unveiling it at the same time, waiting to be deciphered... The face, each of our poor and amazing faces, is an Icon of the Invisible. And the icon is finer, more precious, more beautiful when the artist, when the man who displays it, has been tested... Similarly, I come closer to God to the very same extent that I forget myself for the neighbour who looks at me or when the foreigner becomes my nearest neighbour.*"²⁵

b) *HERE I AM, LORD*

"*Behold, I have come [...] to do your will, O God*" (He 10, 7). Whoever knows that doing the will of the Father is the only sacrifice agreeable to him makes these words his own. Fullness of life, perfect joy, unequalled happiness, such is the outcome of the total gift of one's life to God.

Our soul is that "*hidden reality*,"²⁶ the secret place that "*conceals a mystery of interiority and bears the imprint of the Trinity, the upper chamber where man is invited to lower himself*."²⁷ The prayer of Jesus is an invitation therein and calls

²⁵ Quoted by Leon Scherer, *Le combat spirituel*, Supplement to *Vie Chrétienne*, n° 511, p. 66

²⁶ Edith Stein, *L'Être infini et l'Être éternel*, p. 250, quoted by Éric de Rus, *L'art d'éduquer selon Édith Stein*, p. 46

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 46

for the radical gift of self out of love. A Brother's life has no real meaning if he is not willing to go that far.

Of course, each one makes his way at his own speed, in keeping with his personal history as well as with the generosity of his response. Oftentimes, years are needed to realise that we cannot be fully happy until we have made that radical offering of ourselves to the glory of God.

In fact, this total gift of self represents a twofold attitude: in the first place, the "passive" welcoming of a personal God, close at hand, at the core of our being, and in the second place, the clear and liberating decision to follow Christ on the road to the Passover. "*Here I am, Lord!*"

A personal vocation

Today, when a young person hears a call from within, he sees, should he have the courage to answer it, a door that opens on a future of unparalleled beauty. He does not see, or hardly sees, the trials of the cross that he will have to carry. He just feels that life is calling! He discovers at the core of his being, though he has no words for it, that all that he is giving up is nothing next to what he is gaining. This is why, very often, the young person who hears this call has few questions at the time he hears God's call. The specific grace granted him allows him to discover in himself the image that he is called upon to reproduce, and this is what attracts him.

We are not the source of our vocation as Brothers. It is a free gift of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, it is our responsibility to do all we can to understand the height, the depth and all the dimensions which our vocation in Christ entails, while, at the same time, we remain very much aware that the call is God's, and his alone. No matter how well we explain, accompany and imagine countless means to make matters clear, the Spirit alone

can reach the heart of our being. We must pray fervently and from the heart for the Spirit to move the hearts of young people. We must also call in his name, trusting in his timely action and be respectful of the young person's free response.

This way of our transmitting the call makes us aware that God works in a similar fashion where we are concerned. Today, if we are Brothers at 24, 40 or 80 years old, we owe it to the indwelling Spirit, stirring up the inner fire until, together with Jesus, we can say in the most perfect manner possible: "*Here I am, Lord to do your will.*" Our vocation is to be the image of his perfect offering, that is to say, reproducing it up to the gift of our own life.

Poor

Each one of our vows stamps in us the image of Jesus. The vow of poverty entails the choice of following in his footsteps while showing no concern for a resting place. This vow makes us actualise in a radical way the "*Here I am... send me!*" to God's summons. Deep down, we wish to be where God wants us to be, intimately convinced as we are that God will also be there to look after us.

This solid conviction was Gabriel Deshayes' and John Mary de la Mennais' ground for their trust in Providence. In the words of Father Deshayes: "*Never has Providence ever deceived me.*" Without that intimate conviction, we may wonder whether we truly live evangelical poverty, without which, we may rest assured, our mission is not Gospel-based. God hastens to those who cry: "*Lord, come to our help!*" – "*We are lost without you.*" Only deep poverty can trigger in our hearts, and perhaps in our bodies as well, such prayerful entreaties. Such is the summons of the vow of poverty.

Obedient

The vow of obedience is closely related to that of poverty. A baptised person's life is not his own anymore. Christ has become the Master of his life. The religious seeks to live this radical adherence through the human mediations that are for him the channels of the Spirit. Our submission to a man in the person of the superior through the vow of obedience aligns us with God's will. Although it is the community as a whole that discerns and seeks to do God's will, we have chosen to submit to the will expressed through the agency of the person who has received that mission.

The total offering of one's life requires our willingness to say with Jesus: "Father, not my will, but your will be done." This sometimes entails great self-denial, but the intensity of the Easter joy corresponds to the fervour of our total self-giving. Should we be given to feel the weight of the cross through a difficult act of obedience, let us ask Mary for the grace to love to the end. If we witness a Brother undergoing a similar fate, let us accompany him, just as Mary accompanied Jesus, not to entice him to turn back, but to provide encouragement so that he can love up to the full gift of self.

Chaste

As for the vow of chastity, it brings us even closer to Jesus, the perfect man. The final destiny of our body has been revealed through the Incarnation of the Word of God, for in him, so to say, one finds the accomplishment of what Paul says: "*The body is for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body*" (1 Co 6, 13).²⁸ In him is equally found the manifestation of these words from Hebrews:

²⁸ Cf Arnaldo Pigna, *Repartir du Christ, la spiritualité des vœux*, Ed. des Béatitudes, p. 127

“Sacrifice and offering you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me” (He 10, 5). “The Christian meaning of virginity does not refer to withholding one’s body from someone, but to the consecration and the total gift of self to Christ.”²⁹ It is not a question of choosing celibacy as a way of life, but much more significantly, it is a matter of answering a call to give one’s body to God and to God alone. Thus, far from being a once-and-for-all experience, the vow of chastity is a means to full identification with Christ. This vow commits us to the gradual purification of all our senses so that body, spirit and the whole of our being, in the final analysis, become image of God.

Attractive witnessing

When people observe our lifestyle, they should be able to understand the fundamental call meant for every man and woman and which consists in being like Christ through and through. *“It is precisely the spiritual quality of the consecrated life which can inspire the men and women of our day, who themselves are thirsting for absolute values. In this way the consecrated life will become an attractive witness.”³⁰ Our inner, free and genuine consent is the only testimony that can transpire through our day-to-day behaviour, attitudes and words.*

Young people and adults alike need happy and free witnesses. They can readily discern between authentic and superficial witnessing. The likeness of Christ will shine through us if our lives as Brothers suggest freedom and happiness. This needs no brilliant eye-catching gimmick. All we have to do is simply live with the greatest possible love the gift of self to God every day of our life. The Spirit will see to it that our efforts at inner truthfulness bear fruit. A heart deeply rooted in silent

²⁹ Ibid. p. 128

³⁰ Vita Consecrata, n° 93

listening to the Spirit gives rise to a source from which many will quench their thirst.

c) FOLLOWING THE PROMPTINGS OF THE SPIRIT

Consecrated life is a gift of the Spirit to the Church and to the world. Each congregation which springs forth is a gift for the people of God. Only God, who loves humanity infinitely more than we can ever imagine and who is in the midst of his people, knows what we need.

A gift received through the founders

The charism of the Institute is a gift of the Spirit. Our founders wished for Brothers since they knew to what extent children were in need of the kind of education inspired by God himself. They shared the grief of young people and of children without shepherds. They knew from experience that the only shepherd they needed was Christ. Through deep and authentic discerning of the will of God for their times, they achieved the conviction that schools were needed and that a congregation of Brothers was a necessity.

We are called upon to follow in their footsteps with the same inner dispositions born from a deep communion with Christ's feelings who shed tears upon seeing a people without shepherds. Before organising or planning anything, we first have to respond to the inspirations of the Lord, for it is in hearts that empathize with his that the priorities and the desires of his own Heart are recognized.

It may prove enlightening in this regard to reread what the Church has to say concerning her endorsement of congregations:

“When judgment regarding the establishment of an institute is formulated only in view of its usefulness and suitability in the field of action,... then indeed it becomes evident that the genuine concept of religious life in the Church is in a certain manner distorted. To pronounce judgment on the authenticity of a charism, the following characteristics are required:

- *its special origin from the Spirit, distinct, even though not separate, from special personal talents, which become apparent in the sphere of activity and organization;*
- *a profound ardour of love to be conformed to Christ in order to give witness to some aspect of His mystery;*
- *a constructive love of the Church, which absolutely shrinks from causing any discord in Her.³¹*

This we must hold to be true: It is owing to the promptings of the Spirit that our Congregation has been founded and that it fulfills its mission in the Church today. Its members live by the same Spirit and truly bear fruit only if they act according to his inspiration. The Mennaisian charism is this tremendous gift from God to the youth and his Church. What a wellspring of graces! It is thanks to the Lord if Brothers before us have done so much good. It is also owing to the Lord if we can still do some good today.

The spiritual dimension of the Mennaisian charism

In order to do this, we must take into account more fully the spiritual dimension of our charism, thus avoiding turning it simply

³¹ *Mutuae relationes*, on the relations between bishops and religious congregations, n° 51a

into an intellectual pursuit. There is no charism without the Spirit, or without spirituality, which is life in the Spirit. This charism is our vocation and it is our mission. We must all rejoice and praise the Lord for such a gift. We must ardently ask him to help us become aware of his active presence at the heart of our mission lived with Laypeople.

If that mission is really a gift of the Spirit, it cannot be nourished but through prayer of the heart, through the Eucharist and the Word of God, and through listening to and meditating on the words of our founders. Our founders, in the most amazing way, have discerned the signs of the presence and of the action of God. We are invited to make our own their spiritual experience, and more particularly that of John Mary de la Mennais whom God has given to us as our main guide. Let us go over his writings and the texts of the Rule of Life with a prayerful, obedient and humble heart, open to the dynamism of the Spirit.

Brothers and Laypeople listening to the Spirit

Although it has been received through the Brothers' Congregation, the charism belongs to the Church. As a Church, the way we respond to our vocation and live our mission with Laypeople must be further intensified. Listening to the Word of God, prayer of the heart, life in the Church are the fundamentals without which the charism cannot bear fruit. Such is the challenge of the work achieved in the context of the 2006 General Chapter. We must follow up with audacity and discernment. Once again, it is not so much a matter of proving imaginative or creative as of sharing the burning Love of the Heart of Jesus, the depths of which the Spirit reveals to us. Forging ahead in hope requires nothing less.

We will then be able to say: God was there and I wasn't aware of it! In fact, Christ is alive in us when, at the heart of the Mennaisian Family and together with Laypeople, we are at the service of young people and children. Laypeople and Brothers who share the educational mission on a daily basis are very much aware of this.

FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

- What is central to my vocation as a Brother?
- Am I happy in this vocation? Is my life one of thanksgiving and of dynamism?
- Need I redress anything in my life to be faithful to that call?
- What is my position regarding the Mennaisian Family? Do I see it as a call of the Spirit?
- Am I eager for young people to answer that call today?
- What do I do, personally, to help young people discern the call to the Brotherhood?



3

A LIFE FOR GOD ALONE

1) A LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

a) TRUST IN PROVIDENCE

John Mary de la Mennais and Gabriel Deshayes were steeped in a spirituality which led them to see the work of Providence in all things, to seek therein inspiration, to give thanks to and place their full trust in Providence.

A treatise on divine Providence which appeared in 1861³², differentiates between those “who live in God” and those “in whom God lives”. The first ones work for God, place their trust in

³² This work was published par Father Ramière, s.j. and attributed by him to Father Caussade who died in 1751. This book had a far-reaching influence. Charles de Foucauld claimed it was one of the books he lived by.

fidelity to the Rule, in their obedience to the superior, in their enhanced virtuous living. The second ones, whom the author calls the “inner souls” are those who “*prefer losing themselves while surrendering to the spouse who leads them without rhyme or reason rather than walking with assurance the road stamped with virtue... Henceforth, it is in the “castle of the soul” that God conceals himself for an encounter deep within.*”³³

What is obvious here is the relationship between acknowledging the action of God in everyday circumstances and allowing ourselves to be led by him. Rather than doing good deeds, what seems crucial is recognizing God’s love for us and doing everything out of love for him. Trust in Providence testifies to a relationship grounded in Love. We shall never feel abandoned if we know, even in the deepest night of faith, that God loves us.

Nevertheless, we all know from experience that it is easier to trust in our own deeds than to really trust the Lord’s pleasure. How tempting it is to place our trust in our own powers of foresight and of organisation! We are so very reluctant to give God a chance, so to speak. We do not like surprises and we cannot possibly believe that God is forever by our side. As a matter of fact, our way of doing things confirms whether we are doing deeds for God or whether we are doing God’s work indeed, that is, building his Kingdom. In the first case, we will be tempted to say: “See all that I am doing for you!” In the second case: “Lord, here I am, show me what I must do for your Kingdom to come.”

The Gospel tells us how even the apostles were slow to believe and to understand. They too were eager to serve their Master, but they were rather reluctant to give him the initiative. Just recall the scene of children gathering around Jesus and the

³³ Dominique Salin, L’abandon à la Providence, in *Christus* n° 218 HS, May 2008

apostles' eagerness to chase them away. Remember how Peter frowned up on Jesus speaking of his coming death, and how Jesus told John the Baptist: "*Let it be so for now...*" (Mt 3, 15) as the latter refused to baptize him in the waters of the Jordan. Let us take stock of our life. Are we open to God's "surprises"? Do we allow him a free hand in our life? Do we believe he may have his own ways of reaching out to people? How attentive are we to his ways? Are we even seeking his advice? We are so busy and so preoccupied that we have already done all the work!

We are all familiar with the spiritual advice which consists in doing everything as if everything depended on us while at the same time believing that everything depends on God. How difficult it is to put into practice, however! For fear of not doing well, we are sometimes tempted to do too much! And yet, "*God is so good that he wants us to rest in the bosom of his infinite kindness. He likes to see us sleep peacefully in his bosom for our peace is his glory.*"³⁴ In the final analysis, trust in Providence is the Spirit's gift to the heart that can discern the action of God in the midst of life. Sweet but compelling confidence in God's loving Providence is rooted in seeing him at work and in giving him thanks always.

b) DOING THE WILL OF GOD

It is in this spirit that we can better understand what the expression "doing the will of God" means. Whoever seeks to do what God wills is not motivated by fear but is kindled by love. "*Do not be conformed to this world,*" Saint Paul tells us (Rm 12, 2), for the world in which we live, according to Paul's view of things, has been transformed by God since the coming of Jesus.

³⁴ John Mary de la Mennais, Memorial, p. 13

The law of the world should have no power over us. Christ is the law-maker who defines the Rule of life. Hence, Paul continues, “*but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*”. Our following of Christ entails a radical shift in the scale of values on which we build our life. The cross of Jesus becomes the basic standard by which believers espouse the mind of the Father and love as he does. Discerning the will of God implies gazing upon the crucified Jesus. Without such contemplation, the understanding of the heart is obscured and cannot “renew itself”.

Paul continues: To discern what the will of God is, is to understand “*that which is good and acceptable and perfect*”. To do God’s will is to be in accord with his feelings, to find acceptable what is acceptable to him and to find good and just what is good and just in the eyes of God. The “signs” of God can only be discerned by a like-minded heart that can, like Jesus, “leap for joy” at the sight of Father’s wondrous deeds. However, his thoughts are not our thoughts and the Adversary is on the lookout. He is quite clever at convincing us that our will is God’s will.

Let us listen to Paul once more: “*Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; withal taking up the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the evil [one]. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*” And he adds: “*With all prayer and supplication praying at all seasons in the Spirit, and watching thereunto in all perseverance*” (Eph 6, 14-18).

Whoever seeks the will of God must stand upright, love Truth and seek Justice, not be asleep but be ready for battle. Such is the Christian stance: standing tall in the fullness of the stature of Christ. Such is the stance of the combatant who is fearless, who knows whom he trusts and who, in Christ, is sure of victory.

Whoever wishes to do the will of God takes up the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit, that is to say, the Word of God. Faith is the shield that disarms the Evil One and annihilates his so-called might. The Word of God, which is power of the Spirit, heals, restores, pacifies, purifies and saves.

Lastly, true spiritual struggle is conducted in prayer where God can be met in truth and spirit. Praying implies a vigilant heart that loves and listens. Without prayer, the fiery darts of the Evil One cannot be quenched nor can we stand upright in truth. Prayer makes God's desires our own.

2) A FEW BASIC ATTITUDES

a) *VIGILANCE AND CLEARSIGHTEDNESS*

“*Watch and pray so as not to enter into temptation,*” the Lord told Peter, James and John at Gethsemane. “*Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief,*” echoes the Apocalypse (Ap 3, 3). Jesus calls us to vigilance, not out of fear but out of love, as he himself watches over his disciples so that none of them be lost (Cf Jn 17, 12).

The Rule of Life is given to us as an invitation to watch over our heart so that it may not be lost but so that it remain firmly attached to Christ throughout life. “*Watch over your heart with all diligence*” (Pr 4, 23).

The Rule of Life calls to vigilance with regard to the way we live the vow of poverty. Before dealing with communal poverty, the Rule of Life challenges Brothers to the practice of personal poverty: “*The Brother knows that there are many ways to extend his practice of personal poverty...*” (D 44) The first recommendation of the Rule of Life is to invite each Brother to

discern, to examine one's life and to make judicious choices. To be poor as Jesus wants us to be entails a quiet listening within to grasp what he says. For generous hearts, a "spiritual guide" may without doubt prove helpful.

The Rule of Life also reminds us that in the sphere of chastity "*the free and generous response to this precious gift involves a difficult, sometimes painful struggle*" (D 37). We must watch over the chastity of our heart which can be divided between more or less clearly resolved attachments and the wish to live uprightly and truthfully. The relationships we are called to have in the context of our mission as well as the numerous enticements coming our way through the media are all occasions to exercise vigilance. An attentive and serene heart can peacefully and joyfully discern what best testifies to one's total commitment to Christ. And when the Spirit permeates our conscience with his light, discernment is enhanced.

Lastly, the Rule of Life advocates a similar outlook where the vow of obedience is concerned. Seeking the will of God through human mediations received as a gift presupposes a deep spirit of faith. Thus, for us, our Rule of Life leads to life. Whereas we must find in the Rule of Life nourishment and love it as a loyal friend, we must especially let ourselves be transformed by it. It is the surest way to follow Christ with humility and zeal after the example of John Mary de la Mennais and Gabriel Deshayes. It will help us discern more judiciously what, for us, is the will of God in every day situations. To obey the Rule of Life is to listen to the Spirit and to be taught by the Beloved Son. Such an attitude makes it possible for mind and heart to discern and love what is good.

"Forces vie with each other for the heart of man. How can we discern the 'deceits' of the devil? It is a matter of watchfulness

at the door of our heart. With each enticement, ask yourself: friend or foe?"³⁵ Such is the price of true clear-sightedness.

b) PRAYER OF THE HEART

Paul exhorts us to “devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving” (Col 4, 2). Prayer, grounded in the Word, relieves us from dispersal of thoughts and focuses our attention on God. Such a prayer is not forever looking for emotions or new insights, but is a humble dialogue that lets itself be moved and transformed after the example of the Publican in the Gospel. “Do not make long speeches when talking to God lest your quest for carefully designed and useless words sidetrack your mind. But one word from the Publican sufficed to draw God’s mercy and one trustful word saved the good thief. Long speeches usually fill the mind with fanciful images and confusion whereas few words help gather one’s thoughts.” (Jean Climaque)³⁶

The prayer of the poor moves God and opens to the action of the Spirit: “As for me, my God, I am a beggar and a poor man: dear God, help me!” (Cassian)³⁷ As has been said before, prayer is the most precious of actions because it compels us to be truthful. This is why we find it so difficult to allow prayer to well up from the heart without words, in silence. This is also why we have to be careful and show respect for others’ personal prayer. A personal relationship can seldom be shared for fear of distorting it. Shared prayer is wholesome when listening to the Spirit who speaks to the community, but we should not stand in the way of the Brother

³⁵ Marie-Amélie Le Bourgeois, *La lutte contre les passions*, Christus, n° 218 HS, p. 139

³⁶ Ibidem

³⁷ Ibidem

who is engaged in a heart-to-heart talk with the Lord. Inner dialogue is conducive to transforming and healing that which, in our soul, needs the beneficial stroke of the Spirit's sword.

Spontaneous and heartfelt prayer, together with the recall of a Scripture passage from the morning meditation, is not meant to provide artificially generated spiritual enlightenment. Experience shows that no such wonder takes place and that we soon give up on an "exercise" which we feel is meaningless and unproductive. Fidelity to prayer, however, fosters conversion of the heart. Let us pray the psalms, let these prayers be our nourishment, they will show us the road to the inner man: "*God, come to my assistance! Lord, make haste to help me!*" (Ps 69, 2).

c) *HUMILITY, MOTHER OF VIRTUES*

Humility is the "*mother, the root, the nurse, the foundation and the abode of all other virtues*" according to John Chrysostom. For Cassian, the first of virtues is "discretion", that is to say the "discernment of spirits", the "happy medium", "love in action". For him, humility is a matter of clear-sightedness, of equilibrium and of charity. Opening the truth of one's heart to a spiritual guide is for him a true manifestation of humility and seeking such assistance through self-unveiling leads to conversion. "*He thinks that the more one conceals his thoughts, the more they proliferate and invigorate. Like the serpent that comes out of its den and instantly runs away, so our unwholesome thoughts take flight as soon as they surface... Making known one's thoughts heals, concealing them feeds pride.*"³⁸

Humility should not be mistaken for timidity or the false fear of being in the forefront. Such timidity is but fear to displease

³⁸ Ibidem

or to project a poor image of self. Humility is the truthful stance that allows us to be who we are before God and others, like the poor servant or sinner who needs his brothers' help. True humility walks hand in hand with authentic self-esteem which is not avoidance but gift of self to others. The saints who possessed true humility did not know fear, save that of not doing God's will.

Humility leads to patience and self-control, to charity and uprightness of heart. It is, according to Gregory of Nyssa's expression, "*descent to greatness*". According to Origen, "*the humble person walks in greatness and lives in the midst of marvels that are way beyond his ken*" (Contra Celsum VI, 15). True prayer and authentic brotherly love are impossible without humility. Mary is the living proof of this; her example speaks for itself. See how she hastens to give a hand to Elizabeth. Like her, let us hasten to be of service to our nearest Brother. Imitating her is one sure way of imitating Christ. As a result, adversity will turn out to be a grace that will reveal to us the secret of the Love that lives within us. "*If we wish the Lord to do great things in us and through us, he has to see true and sincere humility at the bottom of our heart.*"³⁹

³⁹ John Mary de la Mennais, Sermon VIII, 2512



FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

- What does trust in Providence mean for me?
- What obstacles do I place in the way of this trust?
- What does doing the will of God mean for me?
- How real is prayer of the heart, constant prayer, for me? What call do I feel?
- What prevents unity of life in me?
- What helps me create unity between my mission and my consecration?



4

STRENGTHENING THE INNER SELF

1) PRAYING THE PSALMS

“Psalms, dear psalms, daily bread of my hope, voice of my service and of my love of God, come to fullness on my lips. Dear psalms, you never grow old, you are hard-wearing...”⁴⁰

Through the psalms, the prayer of the inner man comes to full blossoming. It goes beyond the frontiers of his heart, opening up to the dimensions of the heart of Christ. It takes part in the dialogue between the Groom and the Bride, between Christ and the Church.

⁴⁰ Father Yves Congar, *La Vie spirituelle*, n° 775, March 2008, p. 115

We partake of this prayer of the Church and of Christ when, morning and evening, in community, we pray the psalms. We are then invited to stretch our horizons to the dimensions of the Church and of the world, and to adopt Christ's outlook. Are we really aware of what is happening?

“Whereas the whole of the Holy Scriptures breathes out grace, this is particularly true of the delectable book of the psalms,” remarked Saint Ambrose in his commentary on the first psalm. And he went on to say: *“We sing it for the joy it brings, we learn it for the instruction it gives,”* for it teaches us about Christ.

When we pray the psalms together, our prayer joins the prayer of the Church and the very prayer of Christ himself. We do not pray the divine office as private persons, but as Saint Paul says, *“we rejoice with those who rejoice and we mourn with those who mourn”*. The prayer of the psalms opens our heart to the whole world in the love of Christ.

The prayer of the psalms trains the soul so that it can harmonize with the voice of Christ and of the Church. *“To chant the psalms is to be at one with the Word, to fuse with it. We recite words that have been given to us, but as we recite them, we make them ours so that, as they come out of our heart, they lead us to the very mystery of our heart and to the mystery of God himself.”*⁴¹

Singing the psalms, therefore, entails a conversion of the heart. As we sing the psalms with our brothers, as we unite our voices in the same prayer that we are invited to make our own, our deepest feelings are called upon to change. Little by little, as the months and the years go by, the words that we sing sink in. Christ himself makes his abode in us as he does in our midst when we come together in his Name. It takes years before this work of assimilation takes place. Like the gardener, we wait patiently for

⁴¹ Dom Anselme Grün, *Psalmodie contemplative*, in *Liturgie*, n° 105

the harvest to bear the fruits of our labour. If we sometimes feel that the psalms do not express our prayer, we may rejoice that, in this way, Christ draws us out of ourselves do draw us into the love of his Heart which is the Church. The prayer of the divine office is also a school and a pedagogy which help us pray what the Spirit himself has inspired. The effort of our heart to adhere to the prayer of the psalms allows us to prepare the way for contemplation.

“As we recapture these words of light and of delight, we offer them to God with tender love. They are for him “caresses of the words”⁴² and they linger on the “palate of our heart” like a divine sweetness, in the words of Gregory the Great. Gradually, such an approach can unify and simplify our chanting of the psalms as we are drawn into the freedom of their tide,” writes Bishop Robert Le Gall.⁴³

It behoves us to enter together into this prayer of the Church, into these words which Christ himself prayed. Should we wish to add other words, they must help and not distract others from their own encounter with the Spirit who teaches them how to pray, for this prayer, which expands the heart, embraces each soul in its uniqueness. We must therefore pay more attention to the climate of quiet listening and of silence, to the ambience of simplicity that envelops our prayer, than to explanations – if they take too much room – that risk weakening rather than strengthening vigilance of the heart.

If it is possible, let us do our best to sing the psalms. In the words of Bishop Robert Le Gall, *“the word psalmos in Greek refers to the act of touching a string so that it resonates: a psalm is a sacred poem meant to be sung to the accompaniment of stringed instruments.”*⁴⁴ It is a signal grace as singing builds up

⁴² The expression is Father Beauchamp's, s.j., in *Psaumes nuit et jour*, p. 94

⁴³ Dom Robert Le Gall, *La saveur des Psaumes*, ed. C.L.D., p. 33

⁴⁴ Dom Robert Le Gall, *op. cit.*, p. 30

the community and opens hearts to joy and love. “*This practice of singing the psalms is not only a matter of aesthetics; it helps contemplative prayer, its leads to harmony in one’s heart and to unity in the community.*”⁴⁵ So also said Saint Basil: “*As they sing the psalms, their heart learns quiet listening.*” Often enough, small numbers do not make for choral singing. Here and there, though, even small communities of three Brothers do attempt singing a few psalms. Things are made easier if an instrument – a guitar, a zither or a keyboard – can join the community prayer as a fourth voice. Should that not be possible, there are ways of proclaiming the psalms together which make for harmony of heart. Let us favour the one that succeeds best.

2) LISTENING TO THE LIVING WORD

We do not have the Blessed Sacrament in our room, but we can have the Holy Scriptures. That Book should find its place there and be open, in the same way our heart is always open to give and to receive.

The Book is open as a sign of our readiness to enter into a dialogue at every hour of the day and of the night. The Friend is there to give “*to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost*” (Ap 21, 6b).

No Brother can, today, live without this daily nourishment, without this sustained attention to the Word ceaselessly coming his way. It is difficult to give it much time, taken up that we are by daily tasks. Yet, gazing upon the Book should awaken in us the desire to go to the Source were it but for a mouthful of the water which adds flavour to all our activities.

⁴⁵ Dom Anselme Grün, op. cit., p. 115

“... Every time I find the manuscripts that contain the words of the Lord where they should not be, I wish to pick them up, and I wish others to do likewise, so that we may place them in a more worthy place,” wrote Francis of Assisi. The man who sought so much to imitate Jesus had such love for his words that he could not tolerate that others did not give them the veneration he had for Jesus. He is his own Word. To hold the Book in one’s hands is to receive Jesus, the Word made flesh, just like Mary at the Deposition. “*This cannot possibly be idolatry, a material cult: it is delicacy.*”⁴⁶

Obviously the Book is not there to be gazed at. It is there to be read. Better still, to be eaten. “*I took the little book out of the angel’s hand and ate it, and in my mouth it was sweet as honey; and when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter*” (Ap 10, 10). The way we read the Book betrays our hunger. May we be blessed to taste with love of that God-given honey and understand that we are called to become Word, in the footsteps of Jesus, in the same way that we are called to give up our body and shed our blood with him.

To eat and digest the Book so that it sinks in our heart, a few conditions are required, namely, to desire and to decide. It has already been said: without this important step, nothing will get under way. We may more or less clearly desire to come to the Book. We then have to take the decision to allocate time to the prayerful reading of the Word. Whoever really wishes to be led by the Spirit will feel in his heart that he is invited to find the time when he takes the necessary action to listen to the Word. The morning’s thirty minutes will benefit from it; such is the experience our Rule of life convenes us to.

We also need to read other books which can help us delve into the mystery of the Word that is coming our way. Such an

⁴⁶ François Cassingena-Trévedy, *Quand la Parole prend feu*, Vie monastique, n° 36, Bellefontaine Abby, p. 12

inquiry is not a purely intellectual exercise. All spiritual reading should not only nourish the mind; it should above all nourish the heart. Let us just say that it should allow us to receive the Word in the same way we intend to receive Christ. “*Linking up with the spiritual experience of great saints helps to discover it from the interior, for the same Spirit is at work in the Church, gives rise to saints, inspired the sacred authors and speaks to each of our hearts.*”⁴⁷

But above all, we must come to the Book of the Holy Scriptures with an open heart, disposed to an encounter with God, and pray the Spirit to help us to read the Word as a whole. “*The Lectio divina spans all chronological divisions.*”⁴⁸ We do not read a passage, we read the Word! Each word, each verse is part of the whole and cannot be read but as part of the whole, just like the harmonics of an instrument form part of a symphony. “*Consequently, to get down to Lectio divina is like going to the concert!... Listen to the oceanic fullness of the Bible in the hollow of each verse as in the hollow of a seashell... Listen simultaneously to the vocal multitude.*”⁴⁹ In order to do this, let us ask the Spirit to come to our help, for only the Spirit who inspired these words can help us understand them. Interior silence should pave the way to each and every reading of the Word during which we should turn to the indwelling Spirit and ask him to shed his light on the soul that is being nourished by this incomparable fare. “If you knew the gift of God!” If we knew the fire that burns within as we set down to a reading of the Word!

The last Synod reminds us of the urgency, for us, Brothers, to listen to the Word and to spread the love of the Word around us, especially among young people. “*We are really confronted*

⁴⁷ Bishop Pierre-Marie Carré, archbishop of Albi (France). Intervention during the last synod on the Word of God in the life and the mission of the Church.

⁴⁸ François Cassingena-Trévedy, *Quand la Parole prend feu*, p. 35

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36

with an educational urgency,” said one of the speakers at the Synod.⁵⁰ He had previously stated that Christianity is not a religion of the Book but of the Word..., “a living word, open in a dynamic way to the truth of the revelation it contains.” And he added: “The Apostle reminds us that “‘the word of God is not imprisoned’ ” (2 Tim 2, 9). We are again reminded of the inexhaustible nature of the Word of God which is like the burning bush that burns without ever being consumed. For us whose mission of education is so closely linked to the word, we must learn to listen to it when it comes from God before proclaiming it with force and love. “The Word of God is something alive and active: it cuts more incisively than any two-edged sword; it can seek out the place where soul is divided from the spirit, or joints from the marrow; it can pass judgement on secret emotions and thoughts.” (He 4, 12)

“The words of life, living words that do not keep unless alive,

Nourished, alive,

Nourished, held, warmed up, in a living heart, warm.

Not at all kept in little wooden or cardboard boxes, stale.

Just like Jesus took, had to take flesh, put on flesh

To speak those fleshy words, to have them heard,

So he could speak them,

So we, likewise we, in the likeness of Jesus,

So we, are flesh, must by flesh profit,

Profit that we are flesh to keep them, to rekindle them, to nourish them in us living and fleshy...⁵¹

⁵⁰ Bishop Salvatore Fisichella, president of the Pontifical Academy for Life

⁵¹ Charles Péguy, *Le Porche du mystère de la deuxième vertu*, in *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, Gallimard, 1962, p. 588-591, quoted by Bishop Le Gall, *op.cit.*, p. 47

3) INNERSILENCE

“The call to holiness is accepted and can be cultivated only in the silence of adoration before the infinite transcendence of God: We must confess that we all have need of this silence, filled with the presence of him who is adored: in theology, so as to exploit fully its own sapiential and spiritual soul; in prayer, so that we may never forget that seeing God means coming down the mountain with a face so radiant that we are obliged to cover it with a veil; in commitment, so that we will refuse to be locked in a struggle without love and forgiveness... In practice this involves great fidelity to liturgical and personal prayer, to periods devoted to mental prayer and contemplation, to Eucharistic adoration, to monthly retreats and to spiritual exercises.” (VC, n° 38)

Listening to the Word presupposes silence within; proclaiming the Word presupposes education to silence and openness to the Spirit within; and education presupposes enabling young people to listen to the One who knocks secretly at the door of their heart.

It is not unusual today to come across young people who are enticed by experiences of true silence, not an empty silence, but a silence that opens up to other things, to an Other. Such experiences are not easy, but they are always formative.

Madeleine Delbrêl⁵² who lived this unique experience of inner silence right in the middle of the world, in the midst of “noise”, can show us the way. Dedicated to God and devoted to others, she led a life of contemplation in a busy urban setting. While she never wrote any treatise on prayer, she experienced the presence of God in her daily life, at work and with people. She

⁵² Madeleine Delbrêl (1904-1964) became a convert at the age of 20, from a radical atheist that she was. Her writings show a poetic talent but, above all, a profound mysticism. Her cause has been introduced in Rome in 1990.

could pray in the street, she could listen to the Word and speak about God in any setting because she had learned to meet him everywhere. *“If you go to the ends of the earth, you shall find evidence of God; if you enter the very core of your being, you shall find God himself,”* she would say.

Madeleine became an apostle on the day of her conversion. Proclaiming the Gospel became her passion, for she knew that life without God is meaningless and that the greatest destitution is not knowing him. She wished that everyone she met could share the joy that inundated her heart.

It is through the pastoral care of her daily living that she became skilled at recognizing the voice of God when meeting the poor. She found the desert of her personal encounters with God in the hubbub of her daily activities.

For Madeleine, silence is not primarily absence of noise; it is first and foremost listening.⁵³ To be silent is to listen to God, and God speaks to us everywhere, just as easily in prayer as in the midst of action, in the church as in the world where he calls us. Madeleine knows from experience that it is important not to let occasional slots of silence slip by, but she remarks: *“If noise prohibited silence, how could the poor be evangelised?”* Jesus gives us the example when he withdraws in the company of his Father in the silence of the night and of the desert, but also in the entreaties of the crowds that rush to listen to him and to be cured.

After the example of Jesus, we are, by vocation, called to bring silence to the world so that it can listen to God. In everyday situations, we listen to God in the hollow of our silence if we avoid useless words and concerns. To be silent in our heart of heart is an art that can be mastered only when our quest for God

⁵³ Cf Testimonio, n° 229, Patricia Villarreal, *Hablar hoy desde la cotidiano*, p. 54, September-October 2008

and for his will is a priority. It is all a matter of desire. What do you want? What are you looking for?

*“Silence does not exist so that we may keep quiet. In that case, it would be akin to mutism which has never been anything but a shortcoming in those to whom God has given speech, ostensibly to speak.”*⁵⁴ Why does silence exist, then? So that we may listen! Has not God accused his people of being hard of hearing: *“So I spoke to you, but you would not listen”* (Dt 1, 43). Hardened hearts, like Pharaoh’s, do not listen. If God has given the power of speech, he has also granted the ability to listen. And he himself, having been first to speak to man, was also first to listen to him.

Whoever can be silent can also listen. It takes a heart that listens and refrains from idle words to recognize Jesus in the little ones and the poor. Thus, we can as easily be silent in the street as in the classroom, on the playing field as in the oratory. The words on our lips and the light in our gaze can then convey the proximity of Christ.

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is ONE! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up” (Dt 6, 4-7). Silence within is an open door listening to the heart, whether we are standing or lying down, whether there is noise or not. To listen is to love the will of God and put it into practice. To listen is to love.

⁵⁴ Madeleine Delbr el, *La Joie de croire*, Seuil, Coll. « Livre de Vie », 1995, p. 120

4) PRAYING WITH THE BODY

When referring to interiority or to the spiritual life, we sometimes have the impression of speaking of an invisible world that has nothing to do with the senses and the world. It is as if one had to have out-of-body experiences to have access to it. Let us admit it, this is a mistake which prevents us from undergoing more joyous and more ardent truly spiritual experiences. Let us ask ourselves what role our body plays and what place we grant it in our quest of the inner man.

It is the whole person that loves, works, studies, prays... *“Man is truly himself when his body and soul are intimately united... Yet it is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves.”*⁵⁵

At times, or often enough, we may think that our body need not pray as well as our soul. It is as if it had not been invited to take part. Are we not a little frustrated inwardly when we pray the divine office sitting? Is not the body allowed to express itself? The liturgy of the Church which, in this as in other matters uses sound pedagogy, invites us to associate our body to prayer. Starting prayer by standing up clearly shows our commitment, our wish to forge ahead on God's road and to move together. Standing to sing the *Magnificat* at the Church's suggestion associates the body to the powerful hymn of thanksgiving rising from the heart, the soul and the body of Mary carrying the child of salvation. Why should our body not join in the praise?

For the inner man to live within us, our body needs to contribute. During personal meditation, each of us should observe how his body involves itself in prayer. We might be surprised

⁵⁵ Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus caritas est*, n° 5

how little our body plays its part; we might even find it somewhat embarrassing.

“I kneel when I meditate,” someone says. *“I cannot pray otherwise.”* Another one says: *“I stretch out full length in my room, forehead against the ground. For me, this posture is an ideal preparation for prayer, especially night prayer.”* Yet another one: *“At times, if I have too many distractions, I stand to set off again; in fact, this represents for me an excellent attitude of offering of self. Praying standing up expresses respect, vigilance, disengagement from worldly goods, promptitude to do the will of God.”* A young woman writes: *“Sometimes, I bow down very low for a few moments. At times, I also feel like opening my arms in the form of a cross as if, in that position, I could better express self-giving. These are outward stances that attempt, however poorly, to express the soul’s desire to break away and escape into God.”*

We may perhaps be a little too “cerebral”, thus risking preventing our brother, the body, to harmonise with the soul to sing God’s glory. *“I have the impression that body and soul are intimately linked and that I am as present in the one as in the other,”* a priest was saying after having discovered how his body helped him to pray. At certain stages of our spiritual life, and notably when praying is more difficult, it may be a good exercise in humility to invite the body to help us pray. Don’t we all have to become like children? Let’s look at a child in prayer. Let’s do like him.

Of course, we shall show much discretion during community prayer. Together, we can adopt the stances the Church, our Mother, recommends. Alone, why not allow our body to express itself freely in prayer?



CONCLUSION

At the end of this itinerary, I am aware that I have not touched on a number of other means at our disposal, including the revision of life, the daily meditation, the personal project. My intention was to look at spiritual life from a broad perspective. However, it will be appropriate, at a later stage, to take a closer look at these “spiritual exercises” which may, in fact, require a more detailed development.

“The Kingdom of God is within us. What a statement! So many explorers have set out on a journey, have braved sufferings, in order to decipher in the jungle the ruins of some antediluvian empire which bring rewards that are as dead as their findings. And to think that we have within us this inexhaustible source of knowledge and of strength, this fountain of immortality, and we make no effort to discover it! (Paul Claudel)

As has been said at the start, the Christian educator has received a divine mission. Nothing but a heart transformed by grace can make him worthy of that mission. Rather than having talked about the inner man, we could have referred to the inner dynamism, the inner breath. In reality, it concerns a place, an “interior” where the Spirit of God and our whole being, body and

soul, heart and mind link up and where an experience of God can be lived in truth.

We have in each of us that inexhaustible source, a source that is not for us alone, but equally for those we live with and to whom we are sent. It therefore falls upon us to know that source and to draw from it.

The Son finds pleasure in doing what the Father wills. He is fully himself in being wholly his Father's. He is delighted and he is blessed as he conforms to his Father's designs.

We who at times feel so dry and so poor are invited to share this same blessedness. In order to achieve this, we have, like the Little Prince of Saint-Exupéry, to learn to dig wells in the desert of our life.

For the inner man to be strengthened in us, we first have to open ourselves to the grace of God which alone can lead us to an understanding of the mystery of the presence of God in our lives. Only Christ can give the inner man in us its full stature. Delving in our heart without looking for Christ is taking the risk of bearing no fruits. God wants to transform our weak and powerless hearts by opening them to infinite horizons of grace and love and by allowing them to do great things. *“The dead leaf, all dried up, can be carried over great distances by a violent wind. In like manner, the weak and powerless man is made strong by the grace of the Lord and can do great things.”*⁵⁶

God alone can transform in us what needs to be transformed so that we may witness to his presence and to his love. The surest way for his image to grow in us is to go to him, childlike, and to say to him:

Here I am, Lord. You know my deepest wishes and you know my weakness. Come and transform me. I want to be what

⁵⁶ Taken from a notebook on Meditation by Father Henri Caffarel (1903-1996), founder of Equipes Notre-Dame.

you expect of me. Without you, I cannot. Lord, I am all yours; make me in your image in the midst of children and of young people, with people around me, at the heart of your Church. But above all, hold my hand and don't let go of me. You know only too well, I am capable of not doing what I will and of doing what I do not. Give me the strength to do what you will. Help me to truly love you. Be my only good. Teach me to love as you do, to listen as you do and to teach like you.

Mary, "*you were in the midst of the community of believers, who in the days following the Ascension prayed with one voice for the gift of the Holy Spirit and then received that gift on the day of Pentecost. The "Kingdom" of Jesus was not as might have been imagined. It began in that hour, and of this "Kingdom" there will be no end. Thus you remain in the midst of the disciples as their Mother, as the Mother of hope.*"⁵⁷

Holy Mary, by your prayer and maternal help, strengthen in us the inner man, help us to become true disciples of the Lord, and images of his presence. And grant to our Congregation the joy of welcoming in its bosom new and young disciples with a strong and ardent heart.

Brother Yannick Houssay,
25th January 2009,
Feast of the conversion of Saint Paul

⁵⁷ Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Salvati in Spero*, n° 50

FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

- What are the spheres of my life in which I should strengthen the inner man?
- What personal reflections would I wish to add to what has been written here?
- How can we transmit to today's young people what we have received in the way of spiritual life riches?

