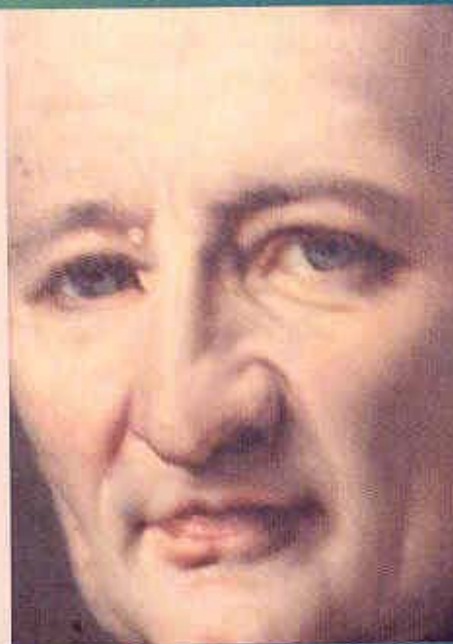


Brothers of Christian Instruction

The Mennaisian Gospel Figure



Letter to Mennaisian Lay Persons and Brothers

Brother Yannick HOUSSAY, superior general

march 2007 n°1

Letter to Mennaisian Lay Persons and Brothers

The Mennaisian Gospel Figure

March 2007, n° 1



Introduction

It is customary in the Congregation for the Superior General to address circular letters periodically to the Brothers. Such letters are an opportunity for him to establish closer links with each one and to propose to the Congregation themes for reflection and for personal and community formation. Over the past years, Brother Jose Antonio Obeso had equally wished for Mennaisian lay persons to read his circular letters. He thus hoped to encourage and accompany the growing number of initiatives with regards to sharing the same mission. We are grateful to him to have helped us walk with confidence and determination on this hopeful journey.

It is in this same spirit that I also would wish to address Mennaisian lay persons and Brothers in these first months of the year 2007.

In fact, the last General Chapters have invited us to greater communion, first among Brothers, then between Brothers and lay persons at the service of the Christian education of youth. I wish to bring my contribution to the strengthening of this communion which is the main condition for our mission to bear fruit.

I wish to state from the start that my frame of reference is a reading in faith of our life and of our work in education. I therefore hope not to close doors but, on the contrary, to invite the participation of all who wish to embrace the full meaning of our commitment. All participate in the common endeavour and the Mennaisian educational endeavour needs the participation of all. Nevertheless, the nature of everyone's commitment is not identical, and personal convictions should be taken into consideration. I therefore address myself mainly to those who wish to share in the Brothers' mission as well as in their spirituality, and who wish to forge fraternal bonds between themselves and the Brothers.

I will then put forward to Mennaisian Brothers and lay persons a course of action for the Congregation in response to a request from our latest General Chapter.

A Call of the Spirit

Our General Chapter was held in Rome in March 2006. In the months that followed, several sectors of the Congregation organized provincial chapters as a way of bringing the thrust of the General Chapter to bear on the life of the Provinces. In most cases, the participation of lay persons, either before or during the provincial chapter, proved decisive. Obviously, we cannot but discern therein a “sign of the times” where the Spirit is at work.

This communion thrust at the heart of our mission, addressed to all, is an invitation to commit ourselves in faith and hope to that call which can only be perceived if we are opened to the “promptings” of the Spirit. It may be well to recall, in fact, that our coming together is not meant as a purely social association. We move forward led by the Holy Spirit who is at the origin of the founding “intuition” of the Congregation. It is not our personal undertaking which we wish to accomplish. Our mission is to bring to full fruition the gift received by John Mary de la Mennais,

Gabriel Deshayes and the first Brothers. Today, we must receive this gift as they themselves received it. Multifaceted and faithful expressions of the gift will emerge from hands joined by the bonds of brotherly love.

We are not the only ones in the Church to live through this move towards a shared mission, far from it. A Mennaisian lay person from Canada bears witness to this: *“On October 28..., a first in the diocese of Baie-Comeau, namely, the meeting of affiliates and of associates with religious communities who work in the diocese. Sixteen out of twenty-four congregations in the diocese have 170 associates... 140 associates attended this much appreciated symposium presided over by their pastor, Bishop Pierre Morissette.”*¹ And he went on to say: *“This call to share the charism of a committed, dynamic and radiating congregation fills them with hope.”*

The large number of studies on this theme over the past few years shows how relevant it is. The whole Church is involved and very many congregations show much interest. Moving in that direction is not to be on the wrong track. And from the Brothers’ perspective, we do not turn toward lay people because we need their help to ‘maintain’ our establishments. We journey together, driven by the breath of the Spirit.

Of course, in this field as in others, the same reality is lived diversely according to countries and continents. It is not a matter of parachuting indiscriminately the practices from one culture onto another. Each culture contributes its share of grace and bears fruits according to the gifts it has received while showing the highest respect for God’s work in others. This implies being capable of listening to one another. This will be one of the objectives of the course of action in which you are invited to participate. Beyond all our differences, we shall live a true communion that will benefit the educational mission.

The Mennaisien Gospel Family

Very many congregations already use the term “family” to express the bonds that unite religious and lay persons with the charism of an Institute.² It is not the only possible word; we can settle the issue once people have had the chance to express themselves. In this letter, I shall use that expression for ease of reference.³

“Mutuae Relationes” states: *“Every charism of foundation is characterised by a profound ardour of love to be conformed to Christ in order to give witness to some aspect of His mystery.”* (51b)⁴

This, it seems to me, means that those who wish to be conformed to the “Gospel figure” with which the founder felt invested – that particular facet of Jesus which determines to a large

extent what may be called the charism of foundation – belong to the same Gospel family.

As far as we are concerned, therefore, those who share with the Brothers the education mission with children and young people and who feel – more or less clearly – that they wish to be with them the way Jesus was, who believe in the active presence of his love and in the power of his saving grace, who rejoice at belonging to this Mennaisian “current” inspired by our founders – these persons are members of the Mennaisian family. Without wishing to overstate the issue, it seems to me important to grasp how the expression “Gospel figure” sheds the required light on what we, Brothers and lay Mennaisians, wish to live together.

Obviously, such a personal call will express itself differently according to different people and the gifts that they have received. Lay persons will embody the Gospel image of Jesus who calls children to himself, who loves and blesses them, each according to their own personal circumstances. Brothers will do likewise at the heart of their religious consecration. It is not a question of superiority of one over the other. Rather, let us say that what is needed in the Church today, for a renewed vitality, are lay persons and religious united in the service of a same charism.

In order to grasp the internal power of that call to “reproduce” that “aspect” of the mystery of Christ, it may be good to recall what our Founder asked of the Brothers: *“May the Lord make of you men according to his heart, devoted to his Church, detached from yourselves, poor in spirit, humble, zealous, ready to undertake anything and to suffer everything to spread his word and his kingdom, and to set the world ablaze with the purifying and nourishing fire, this boundless Love...”*⁵ And he added: *“Go teach these poor children who yearn for the bread of instruction...”*⁶

So as to be image of Christ with young people, a Brother, according to John Mary de la Mennais, must build his life on the total gift of self to God through total availability. The Brother becomes available to be sent wherever the mission calls. He serves the children like Christ, sharing his resources with his Brothers in fraternal living where love makes the mission bear fruit. His ardent and diligent prayer allows the Father, in the Spirit, to transfigure his person in the image of the Son, and to sustain and give meaning to his self-giving.

The religious life of a Brother carries in itself, in spite of the shortcomings of those who have been called, an essential dimension of the foundation charism of the Institute. Saying this does not minimise the dimension proper to lay Mennaisians, on the contrary. They are invited to share in the fullness of the charism which the Brothers have first received but of which they are not the owners.

Each baptised person is called to a life of communion with God. This bond of friendship with him involves the whole of one's being and relationships: family life, professional life, associations and others, various relationships, etc. Lay baptised persons thus experience the action of the Spirit who prompts them to be figures of Christ with young people in the manner intuited by John Mary de la Mennais. This affects their life, brings them closer to the living Christ, inspires them to be like him. They do not embody this grace in the same way a Brother does. They must draw upon a creative imagination inspired by the Spirit in order to discern together, in the Church, how to be truly faithful to that calling. They feel the need to nourish themselves on the Word of the indwelling Presence and to share a life of greater intimacy with him. In response to that call, lay Mennaisians are, together with the Brothers, although in a different way, expressions of the charism, a gift to the Church today.

We can speak in terms of a true Mennaisian Gospel family. Its members have heard the call to live the Gospel more deeply through the image of Christ who welcomes children to him. After John Mary de la Mennais, they hear Jesus say: *"So it is the will of your Father who is in heaven that none of these little ones perish."* (Mt 18, 14) They welcome the grace to be, in Christ, among those who will do everything they can to ensure that today's youth do not go astray. As has been previously pointed out, this is more than just social work; this is a Gospel-inspired outlook which transforms the heart and makes the mission bear fruit. Both Brothers and lay persons feel that they belong to the same family. They draw from the same inspiration which they embody in the Church under diverse but complementary forms.

I do not broach here the question of the various degrees of commitment of lay Mennaisians, nor do I discuss the various ways of understanding and of living the issues which I have just evoked. I only wish to insist on the importance of feeling called to share in the spirit of that large family. Thus, the headway made by each one, while due consideration is given to diverse sensitivities, will become a new source of dynamism in the service of the Christian education of youth.

A Proposal to Move Forward

The beauty of a mountain is revealed while climbing it. Whoever endlessly hesitates to set off on the ascent will never enjoy the pleasure it provides.

“The General Council⁷ will see to the development of a framework for the shared mission.” The March 2006 General Chapter thereby invites us to take things a step further. The “framework” referred to here involves the various means which sustain and guide Mennaisian lay persons and Brothers. Such a call, already formulated at the General Chapter of 2000, must not go unheeded.

Today, in some of our educational endeavours, lay persons and Brothers attempt to give priority to young people going through difficulties. Lay Mennaisians in several parts of the Congregation witness to the importance which the Mennaisian spirituality takes on for them. Others give several months of their life as “Mennaisian volunteers”. Elsewhere, a frame of reference

exists whereby lay persons and Brothers share the same responsibilities for the common good. In other places, some people wonder what course to follow as regards community living and await some guidance concerning higher levels of commitment.

All of this is proof enough that the expression “shared mission” comprises various realities. That diversity represents a wealth of opportunities. It also suggests the need to better define these life experiences so as to give rise to even greater dynamism and creativity. Even if the Chapter has opened a number of doors, especially where “associate members” are concerned, it has not set out all the parameters. It could not do so without lay Mennaisians having made their own contribution.

Perhaps the time has come for them to do so. As we listen to those who are working alongside the Brothers, we feel the need to move ahead, drawn into the rhythm of the Spirit who, at the heart of the Church, can combine patience, wisdom and prudence, daring, enthusiasm and creative imagination.

In order to do this, the General Council has decided to launch a vast survey throughout the Congregation. The purpose of the survey is twofold: to become better acquainted with people’s life experiences in diverse situations and cultures and to allow lay persons and Brothers to express their expectations and questions as well as their hopes and projects.

Then, in 2008, the General Council will convene an Assembly of delegates of lay persons and of Brothers from the whole Congregation. The aim of that international meeting of “Mennaisians” will be, in the light of the results of the survey, to propose ways of living for lay persons and Brothers to combine their efforts in giving the charism of foundation a new vitality.

I therefore invite you to give close attention to the survey which will come your way through the Provincial or Vice-Provincial. The survey will give rise to shared reflection among lay persons or between lay persons and Brothers. Each will be in a position to contribute to the building up of the house which we wish to put up for the glory of God.

It may very well be that all the ideas and all the wishes expressed will not receive an immediate or direct response. However, the quality of the discernment which the survey will provide under the responsibility of the General Council, cannot but be very valuable.

A Few Pointers to Show the Way

As I have said in the introduction, the main purpose of this letter is to encourage one and all to adopt the approach recommended by the General Chapter. Nevertheless, I would wish to give a few helpful indicators so that we journey together even if some of these measures are already being followed with much profit in a number of Provinces. They are a few suggestions that may help ever so slightly to live the Christian vocation as a way of being configured gradually by the “Gospel figure”, expression of the charism. *“The very charism of the Founders appears as an ‘experience of the Spirit’, transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth.”* (Mutuae Relationes 11B)

Here are, therefore, a few suggestions which may help us live that experience of the Spirit. They are not given in order of importance. Each one has its own importance but bears fruit only in connection with the others.

1. *Prayer as Openness to Love*

“We could call prayer ‘the tabernacle of God among men’.” (Ap 21, 3)⁸ Prayer is a “home”. It allows us to inhabit our body, our history, our condition. It allows us to live in God and helps us to welcome him in, who wishes to make his home with us.

Jesus himself tells us: *“But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret.”* (Mt 6, 6) Then God introduces himself as a friend, bearing gifts: *“I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost... and I will be his God and he will be My son.”* (Ap 21, 6) He comes into each one’s home, in one’s family, parents and children together. He comes at the heart of life, soothing tensions, comforting us in trials, sharing his presence, inviting us to stand tall. With him, we open up to the world, to the youth and to all persons who may find rest with us and whom we present to the Father.

To give a place and a time to prayer does not take us away from the mission. On the contrary, it makes it bear fruit. Five, ten, fifteen minutes or more can be given to him, alone or as a family or coming together as a community that prays. One may use Jesus’ prayer, the Our Father, or pray a psalm, or draw on a passage from the Word of God which we read, share, meditate and turn freely into a prayer of praise and of entreaty. Let us not hesitate to request the help of a Brother or of another person who can give us good advice “to dwell in our house of prayer” comfortably. Very many already live these heart-to-heart moments with God. I can only encourage them to carry on with perseverance, and I invite

those who still have not dared to try the adventure, to answer the call of the indwelling guest.

2. *Drawing from the Words of the Founder*

We currently have a small book entitled “*Mennaisien Spirituality*”⁹ which can help us become disciples of John Mary de la Mennais. This book was primarily meant for the Brothers, but lay Mennaisians can also benefit from it. I invite those who wish to deepen their knowledge of the intuition that presided at the foundation of the Congregation to read it and delve into it. It may be a good idea to read it jointly with Brothers, placing greater emphasis on the “personal and apostolic dimensions” of each chapter, carefully drawing from it what is more relevant to the vocation of baptised lay persons. I also invite Brothers themselves to offer their assistance to those who wish to go deeper into the texts.

Much benefit can also be drawn from another book which, unfortunately, has not been translated from the original French version. The book is entitled “*Prier 15 jours avec Jean-Marie de la Mennais*”.¹⁰ This book is part of a collection which, according to the editor, allows readers “to spend fifteen days in the company of a spiritual master savouring moments of light which provide openings in our daily universe”. As far as we are concerned here, “one can say that the book consists of fifteen doors of access, any one of which can be used depending on the taste or the need of the moment... As with any book of spirituality, the most important thing,” says the author, “is for the written word to journey from the head to the heart.” This book is an excellent help for groups of “Mennaisians” who are looking for a guide.

Since it is a matter of living the Mennaisian spirituality, entering into a prayerful reading of these books is one way of opening ourselves up to the spirit of the foundation. This is an

indispensable step in our personal and community formation. Living in communion implies drawing from the same source.

3. *There is strength in numbers*

Our growing sense of belonging to the Mennaisian family must be continually sustained. The means suggested above make this possible only as long as we decide to come together for prayer and formation.

Praying together at regular intervals whether among lay persons or with Brothers gives rise to faith in ourselves and fosters openness to the Spirit who inspires the ardent desire to educate and evangelise young people and children.

A community that is sent on a mission at the heart of the Church and of the world shares the Word of God, draws nourishment from the writings of the Founder, lends a collective ear to the promptings of the Spirit and finds ways to answer the call.

After having savoured and been nourished by the writings of the Founder, giving ourselves guidelines implies making a collective effort to translate his teachings into our lives. Such is the mutual assistance which members of the same Gospel family are expected to provide one another.

We cannot acknowledge ourselves members of the same family without those moments of mutual enrichment and without acting upon the orientations which the Spirit has inspired us.

Conclusion

“In an association between religious and lay persons, is not the open acknowledgement of different embodiments of the same spirit for mutual spiritual enrichment the only way forward?”¹¹ And can we not add, so that the Church-given mission may bear more abundant fruit, that God be glorified and that salvation be proclaimed?

Mennaisian lay persons and Brothers bring a positive response to that question. We must show greater enthusiasm and ardour while forging ahead in response to the needs of the youth.

We shall do so with discernment, in the Church. We shall take care to remain faithful to the orientations of the General Chapter and to journey in unity, seeking the will of God under the leadership and guidance of the General Council.

We shall be all the more truly members of this Mennaisian family as we look to strengthening the bonds with the whole of the

body. Hence, this call to all to a “sharing of the gifts received” in the framework of the whole Congregation for greater fidelity to our mission.

I cannot insist too much on the necessity to embark without delay on this international adventure which will open our hearts beyond our familiar horizons. Let us enlarge the space of our tent (cf Is 54, 2) and let us be led by the Spirit.

The members of the Council count on you, Mennaisian lay persons and Brothers, to embark upon this leg of the survey, of experience-sharing and of proposals. Time for discerning will then follow so that we can then celebrate life blossoming in our hands through the grace of God.

“Father, may I be like the watchman who never tires of watching out for the dawn.”¹²

Brother Yannick Houssay, S.G.
February 16, 2007

¹ From an account in “Le Trait d’Union”, news bulletin of the Associates and Brothers of the Jean de la Mennais Province (Canada).

² Brother Jose Antonio Obese, Circular n° 295, June 2001: *Shared Mission: Creative Fidelity to the Mission*.

³ I rely on a very interesting study by Laurent Boisvert on the links among Charism, Spirituality, Mission, religious and lay persons: *Le Charisme. Un visage évangélique à incarner et à manifester*, Bellarmin, 2005.

⁴ *Mutuae Relationes*: Directives for the mutual relations between bishops and religious in the Church, 1978.

⁵ Sermon of John Mary de la Mennais S VII, 2297

⁶ Sermon of John Mary de la Mennais S VII, 2242

⁷ The General Council of the Congregation consists of the Superior General and of 3 Assistants. They are elected by the General Chapter for a six-year mandate. The General Chapter is held every six years in Rome and, beside electing the General Council, defines the orientations of the Congregation for the next six years. The current General Council elected by the March 2006 General Chapter consists of the following persons:

Superior General :	Br. Yannick HOUSSAY (French)
1 st Assistant :	Br. Miguel-Angel MERINO (Spaniard)
Assistant :	Br. Gerard BYARUHANGA (Ugandan)
Assistant :	Br. Gildas PRIGENT (French)

⁸ Declaration of the bishops from Belgium, quoted by Xavier Dijon, S.J., in *Vies consacrées*, October-November, December 2006.

⁹ Book written by Brothers Miguel-Angel Merino (1st Assistant) and Josu Olabarietta (member of the Bilbao community, Spain). Brother Miguel-Angel was the director of the renewal session and Brother Josu was General Assistant when they wrote the book.

¹⁰ Brother Yvon Deniaud, *Prier 15 jours avec Jean-Marie de la Mennais*, ed. Nouvelle Cité, 2006. Brother Yvon Deniaud (member of the community of Papeete, Tahiti) was Secretary General of the Congregation when he wrote the book.

¹¹ Maurice Vidal, “Les laïcs séculiers et la vie religieuse dans l’Église », *Vie consacrée*, 1987, quoted in an article by Christiane Hourticq (*Mediasèvres* 2006 n° 111)

¹² Brother Yvon Deniaud, *Prier 15 jours avec Jean-Marie de la Mennais*, p. 66

* *First cover page, portrayal of Father de la Mennais by Paulin Guérin*