

Brothers of Christian Instruction

*To call,
the way
of Hope*

Roma - September 2007

D†S

*A presentation
on the Vocations Ministry Session*

at Castelgandolfo,

August 5 – 12, 2007

To call
the way of Hope.

Introduction

“When Our Lord Jesus Christ appeared for the first time after his resurrection in the midst of his disciples, what did he say to them? Peace be with you. And such are the words I address to you, or more exactly, the promise that I make to you at the moment you take your first vows at the foot of the altar. Peace be to you!

... that is why in order to find the repose of your soul you must detach it from itself, if I may so express it, so that in future it may live a life, no longer its own, but the life of Jesus Christ.

... Courage, My Brother, keep this maxim before you: Leave all to find all.”¹

Can a Brother, today as yesterday, remain unmoved when reading these words of dear Father Jean-Marie de la Mennais?

Who would not wish to address them again to our young Brothers?

Who would not like young people to hear within themselves the radical call of Jesus: *“If you wish to be perfect, go, sell*

¹ S VII 2377

what you have, give it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven, then come follow me” (Mt 16,21)

An observation.

We are all aware that that as regards the Brother’s vocation, our Congregation, like so many others, is going through a difficult time.

In certain countries young people start the Novitiate each year. We welcome with joy these young men who aim to pursue our mission with us. This is a sign of Life, and with it Hope! Though this does not dent our enthusiasm for living out the Menaisian mission in education together with our lay colleagues.

In other parts of the world, in spite of efforts made, no young person – in some cases for many years – has responded to the invitation. Have we been too timid perhaps? Maybe we no longer offer any invitations! But above all, any call given, from north to south, gets so easily lost in the noise of so many other attractions, that few young people are sufficiently open to the signs of the Spirit. Of course, we share such observations and self-questioning in common with all other religious congregations and diocesan priests.

The General Chapter 2006.

The General Chapter 2006 made the following observation: *“our Congregation has been in a state of emergency for some years.”* Then, it added: *“To respond to this urgent need, we must renew our vocation ministry. For this, we must move on from the preoccupation with a lack of vocations to an awareness of personal and community responsibility” ... “We must dare to leave the*

beaten path, our routine habits, and open ourselves to the unexpected from God... ”²

A meeting on vocation ministry at Castelgandolfo.

To respond to the demands of the Chapter, a meeting in Rome from 5th to 12th August 2007, brought together delegates from each Province and Vice-Province. The intention was to begin a process that would allow all parts of the Congregation to take part. This was a first stage, which will probably be followed by others. The future will tell.

These Brothers came together, not as specialists in vocation ministry. They were sent by Provinces or Vice-Provinces, representing their confreres so that the latter feel called and invited to be part of the process. They brought with them too, the hopes of so many lay colleagues who are fully behind this ministry.

The General Council had decided that for this meeting, only one member from each Province or country be invited. The aim was to listen to the Brothers and to allow each one to come to a better understanding of the varied realities faced in vocation ministry across

the Congregation. The Council is convinced, however, that the Laity should be involved in our deliberations, since they are closely involved with our mission. No true vocation ministry can go forward without this joint undertaking, in communion with the whole Church.

Aims of the meeting.

Two objectives were set for this meeting. These could be summarised as follows:

² cf General Chapter 2006, p. 23 +

1. In the area of youth vocation ministry, to strengthen faith and hope where our work bears no visible fruit, to awaken apostolic fervour where it is asleep, to consolidate where there has already been some success.

2. To make youth vocations ministry a focal point of the Congregation's activities in the same way as Common Mission and Ongoing Formation. We must be sensitive to all forms of vocation. However, as the Rule of Life invites us, we should place a special emphasis on the vocation of the Brother. There is today an urgent need to take a fresh approach to this in certain countries.

We have therefore searched together how best to develop a new dynamism in this area in the light and freedom of the Holy Spirit. To this end, we raised the question already mentioned by the General Chapter of a possible international Assembly in 2009.

An invitation addressed to all.

The proposals which were made by the Brothers who participated in this gathering are an invitation addressed to all Brothers and, to a large extent, to the Laity.

They will serve no purpose if there is not, to begin with, a change of outlook on the world, on young people, on the Church, and perhaps too, on our own vocation.

A new dynamism for new vocations.

The vocation of the Brother of Christian Instruction, or De La Mennais Brothers is not our own property. We have been called to it without any merit on our part. It is not an honorary title. Nor have we chosen it. The Lord has called us. Having heard his call, we have said yes. It is our way of life sustained by a continual dialogue with the Lord. He is beside us every day. Every day he re-

news his call. Every day of our lives, up to our last breath, we must make the choice to say yes and to give our all.

Every vocation is unique in the sense that it is God who calls a man or woman “by his/her name”. *“I have been created to do or to be something which no other has ever been created for. Never mind that I be rich or poor, despised or lauded by men. God knows me and calls me by my name. In some way I am as much needed in my place as an archangel is in his”*³, wrote Cardinal Newman.

*“‘Vocation’ means fundamentally ‘a call’: there is therefore an external call, an objective call and an interior willingness to allow oneself to be called and to recognise oneself within the model which has not been created by the one called”*⁴.

God reveals me to myself when he calls me. He opens up a dialogue with me which lasts for life. My reply, freely given, is the way I enter into this relationship of love with God – sinner though I am – with God, a unique relationship that no other person can have in my place.

Who can therefore say that to-day the Lord no longer calls young people to this vocation to which He has called me? It is obvious they are responding in a different way from me! However, no one can dictate to God what he should do. I can, on the other hand, place obstacles through my lack of faith, my lack of enthusiasm, by my own inability to discern what He expects of me in this area. I can too, by a lack of willpower, not take the means to ensure that this call reaches as many people as possible.

“We complain often in the Church about the lack of response in relation to vocations, without realising that the proposal is often made within a small, close knit group and is, perhaps, withdrawn after a first refusal. It is good to recall here what Paul

³ Dictionary of Spiritual Life, Vocations, p. 1172

⁴ Final document of European Congress on vocations to the priesthood and religious life in Europe, 1997 N° 37

VI said: 'That one cannot be held responsible for another person ignoring that which they should know in order to give their life a greater sense of direction.'⁵ And yet, how many young people have never heard an invitation to a Christian calling relating to their future life!''⁶

If we love our vocation and if we strive to live it, we will have in our heart the desire to make it known and loved, to make known the story of our love story with God.

"A young person needs to be stimulated by high ideals, in view of something which goes beyond him and which is beyond his means, something for which it is well worth giving one's life."⁷

These few words are meant only as an invitation, addressed to the Brothers that they be the first "witnesses" of the call that God continues to give to-day. They are meant too for the Laity, for whom, feeling themselves called to promote the gift of the Spirit that expresses the charism of our congregation within the Church, they have at heart the desire to help all young people to understand their place in a loving relationship between each person and their Creator and Saviour.

Our mission is to transmit, with faith and hope, the call that the Lord addresses to every young person today. Every life is a reply to an expression of Love. Every life is a vocation. As Christian educators, we should help each person to respond to Him who calls them, to discern this call and to respond with joy.

"There where the Spirit of God is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3,17). This mission is entrusted to a person with freewill. Its dy-

⁵ Paul VI, Look at Christ and the Church, message for 15th world day of prayer for vocations, 1978

⁶ Final document of European Congress on vocations to the priesthood and religious life in Europe, 1997 N° 33

⁷ Final document of European Congress on vocations to the priesthood and religious life in Europe, 1997 N° 36

namism depends on the apostolic ardour of the one to whom it is confided. Lived out in the freedom of the Spirit, it will give rise to fresh and effective action which will touch hearts.

Of course, the responses that young people will make to our call will not be addressed to ourselves, but rather to God. This is what we desire with all our heart. But, within the diverse paths of grace that are the many vocations within the Church, having at heart the desire to speak of our own “journey” can be for our young people today a path to true happiness, freedom and holiness.

Proposals made by the Brothers at the meeting

The focal points for reflection and the initiatives presented here are the fruit of the discussions which took place during the Rome meeting. They are an appeal to set out on a journey with renewed enthusiasm.

These writings have no special authority other than that of being the fruit of exchanges between Brothers engaged in this mission, who came together from all sectors of the Congregation at the invitation of the General Council.

The proposals of the Session are gathered here in alphabetical order. They are not a plan of action but constitute a body of recommendations and suggestions. They are not intended to replace, nor more importantly, contradict the plans for Vocation Ministry already in existence in Provinces and Vice-Provinces. Action plans are necessarily more precise and adapted to each context and culture. The proposals that follow may, on the other hand, be seen as confirmation of what has already been undertaken, as an

invitation to engage in fresh initiatives in relation to particular points, or to engage in a completely new approach.

Everyone will benefit therefore, following the leadership of the Major Superiors, from reading and studying this document, individually at first, then with other Brothers and then with the Laity.

The documents which were given as a stimulus for discussion to the participants at the Rome meeting, as well as this letter, can be found on the internet site of the Congregation (www.ficplm.org) in the three principal languages. I invite you to visit the site. You will find too, the opportunity to give your views and to dialogue with other Brothers and Lay Mennaisians.

Proposals

The following proposals were made at the end of the Session on Vocation Ministry held at Castelgandolfo, 5th-12th August 2007:

They are listed in alphabetical order according to their headings. Apart from the proposed Assembly in 2009, these are recommendations that each Province or vice-province can draw inspiration from as a means to giving new dynamism to their own vocation ministry projects.

An Assembly in 2009?

Towards the end of the Session, the question of organising an Assembly, first suggested by the general Chapter, was raised. The participants agreed the following:

- That there should be an international gathering of those responsible for youth ministry and more specifically vocations ministry.
- That this would involve brothers, laity and young adult youth leaders whose numbers may vary according to their country, bearing in mind local circumstances and travel possibilities.
- That we would also encourage the organisation of youth gatherings by country or continent, but that this would be for Provinces and Vice-Provinces to discuss and discern.

Communication:

- We encourage developing improved channels of communication using the range of modern media (leaflets, posters, internet

site, radio, etc) in order to make known our vocation as a gift of the Spirit for our world.

- We consider it important to increase our efforts at maintaining contact with our former pupils, through our various apostolates, youth groups and movements, summer camps and through modern forms of media communication.

Conversion:

- There can be no programme of renewal in our vocation ministry without conversion to the God of Jesus, individually and in community, as part of our common mission (personal prayer, daily examen, office, prayer groups, all inviting us to conversion).

Engaging Brothers and communities:

- Brothers, we must live out in community our vocation and ministry in an outgoing, visible way which appeals to the youth of today.
- In community, we should be involved in the awakening, accompaniment and support of vocations, most importantly by welcoming young people and by our commitment to our educational mission.
- Joyfulness, openness and availability in our fraternal life, this is the most important way of living out our mission and of calling young people.
- The binding force of our community life is our commitment to serving our charism, and its particular expression of the Gospel message.
- In community the Brothers support one another in their mission.

- It is where young people can experience the joy of living together as Brothers in the service of the Lord and young people and where they can take the first steps in their life plan.
- The community will seek as much as possible to be part of youth movements in conjunction with parishes and dioceses.
- It will offer opportunities for young people to experience different forms of voluntary work, both in the local area and in mission countries abroad, offering support to them in their various activities.

Families:

- We think it important to develop a vocations ministry that involves the families of young people.

Founders:

- We are convinced that Mennaisian vocation ministry must start with a presentation of our founders. We must know them better ourselves and seek to make them better known.

Formation of youth leaders and all involved in youth ministry:

- We encourage the development of formation programmes for those responsible for youth ministry and vocation ministry in particular.
- We think that publishing formation booklets aimed at young people will help to support existing vocation groups and encourage new ones.

Hope:

- We will ask the Brothers (individually and in community) not to lose hope and to keep a spirit of openness towards young people, especially where vocations are more rare.

Identity:

- It is important to redefine the place of the religious educator in today's context.
- Also to deepen the understanding of our life as a Brother in community as a sign and realisation of the Mennaisian Charism (Rule of Life, ongoing formation ...)
- And to live fully as Brothers in collaboration with the Laity.

International dimension:

- We think that a greater apostolic dynamism could grow from the development of increased collaboration between countries in terms of missionary activity and youth projects, as it has done already in relation to initial and ongoing formation.

Pedagogy, a vocation culture:

- Together with all those involved in youth ministry within our schools and Mennaisian centres, we should increase awareness of the need for "a vocation culture". Such a culture would encourage young people to view their lives as a free and voluntary response to a "call", a "vocation" addressed to each personally by God. This in the context of the unique Christian Vocation which consists in being a "child" of the Father in Jesus the beloved Son, a personal and unique way of being in the "image of Jesus".
- To offer to each person the opportunity to truly experience Christ, as the Friend who knocks on their door and begs their friendship, who invites them to give generously of themselves.
- To establish wherever possible vocation groups as places to support the living out of gospel values, to encourage openness to others and the freely offered gift of self in practical service.

- To allow young people, through a real experience of God, to discover their life's ideal, their "evangelical dream" - a gift of the Spirit for their own happiness - and the service of God and other people.
- To put in place a structured programme that includes the presentation of different types of vocation within the Church, offers opportunities for discernment, spiritual direction, etc...

Presenting the Brother's vocation:

- We suggest to all Provinces and Vice-Provinces that they should develop a way of presenting the vocation and mission of the Brother that takes into account the differing situations and contexts throughout the Congregation.

Prayer:

- We strongly reaffirm a conviction ceaselessly presented by the Church and already lived out in so many of our communities:
- that prayer is essential for the young and for those working with young people.
- that prayer is the starting point of vocation ministry. The invitation to pray is one that unites us all in faith - Brothers, Laity, the young.

Shared Mission:

- Our mission and vocation are lived out in the Church.
- They are rekindled by the commitment of our Mennaisian laity.
- This gives the Brothers the opportunity to show a renewed identity.
- We think it is essential that the responsibility for vocation ministry be borne by Laity and Brothers together wherever possible.

-
- This involvement of Laity in vocation ministry will serve to renew dynamism.

Visibility:

- We ask that Brothers reflect on how they might become more visible as a way of reaching out to the hearts of those young people that the Spirit is calling.
- We invite each Brother and each community to develop new forms of visible witness to our identity and charism through community activities (including prayer) and apostolic work.
- We encourage them to be present to young people, personally and in community, in collaboration with the Laity.

Vocation Ministry Project:

Within the framework of developing a project for vocation ministry, we encourage Provincials and Vice-Provincials to make vocation ministry a priority, seeking to integrate in our work young people and the laity in general.

Youth Ministry:

- We should open up vocation ministry to all young people, not simply to the young people in our own establishments.
- Develop collaboration between our own vocation ministry and that of dioceses.
- And integrate more fully vocation ministry into apostolic activities within our establishments and youth movements, with an emphasis on the evangelisation of the young.

Conclusion

When we speak of vocation, we touch on the personal mystery of each individual, their true “Me”, the fundamental relationship that God wants to establish with each one, the absolutely unique direction given to the life of each person.

I would like to end this brief letter on vocation ministry by an appeal to live out more fully our own life as a reply to the Word addressed personally to each of us by the Lord.

In this spirit I refer to this extract from a letter from St Paul: *“We ask God that through perfect wisdom and spiritual understanding you should reach the fullest knowledge of his will. So you will be able to lead the kind of life which the Lord expects of you, a life acceptable to him in all its aspects; showing the results in all the good actions you do and increasing your knowledge of God. You will have in you the strength, based on his own glorious power, never to give in, but to bear anything joyfully”* (Col 1, 9b-11). Is there a more beautiful way of presenting the mystery of the personal vocation than these words of St Paul?

We find there everything that relates to a life lived for God in the total gift of self; the wish to know the will of God; the wisdom and spiritual understanding given by the Spirit; behaviour worthy of the Lord which pleases him because it is directed entirely by him and for him; the fact of bearing fruit and knowing God, doing his will in all things, whatever pleases him; the fact, too, that in the dynamism of our response, we are strengthened and receive the gifts of the Spirit: perseverance, patience, etc...

Meditating upon this text strengthens the conviction that no one can be fully happy unless he sees his life as a response to the Love of God who calls him by his name.

We find there the words which strengthen in each of us the desire to be witnesses to the call that the Lord addresses to the young people of today.

I would also like to end this letter by inviting you to pray.

We must pray so that young people - those whom we know, and those we do not know - discover God working in them for their happiness.

May Mary, *Our Lady of the "Fiat"* be for us an attentive, loving Mother. May she help us to be led joyfully by the Spirit. In fidelity and love. May she intercede for us that young Brothers join us and that they revive in us the wish to be, in Jesus, "brothers" to all, and in particular to the young.

Holy Spirit, enflame the hearts of the young today,
so that, leaving all to follow Christ, they discover
the true joy of being disciples.

Send them amongst their brothers in the service of
God's people.

Send them into the world, men and women with
apostolic hearts.

Send them out as pioneers, witnesses fired up by
missionary zeal.

Send them into the silence of the desert, passionate
seekers of the living God.

Spirit of love, give to all young people the courage
to respond to the call of the Father, of the Church
and of the world.

May Mary, humble servant of the Lord, open to the
freedom of the Spirit, accompany them on the way
of light and life.⁸

Brother Yannick Houssay, s.g.
Rome, 15 September 2007

⁸ Prayer taken from a booklet given to French-speaking Brothers.

