

**IN PREPARATION OF A CENTENARY
STEPS OF A TRIAL FOR BEATIFICATION**
Talk given in Jersey, on the occasion of the last day of the Novena to our Father
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1 - THE PREVIOUS STEPS

On a radiant afternoon in the month of August, an unusual procession walks through the enclosing wall of the Mother-House at Ploërmel. We often see funeral cortèges in this enclosure, but this time, it's rather a triumph. Banners and flags float in the wind, all the bells are ringing (there are even now bells in the steeple!), young boarders carry flowers; cheerful songs alternate with band pieces played by the Harmony of the Seminary... The procession consists of one thousand Brothers, novices, and postulants, - some came from Canada or the colonies, and five wear a military uniform, - nearly 200 priests wearing a surplis, among whom we see about twenty Canons. All the priests and brothers hold a candle. A crowd from all ranks close the march.

You have guessed rightly. This triumphal procession, maybe, unique at Ploërmel, is that of August 6, 1900, which accompanies the venerated remains of Jean-Marie de la Mennais, from the community graveyard to the parlor, and then to the chapel. The ceremony of their canonical recognition must take place on this very day.

The canonical recognition of the remains of a servant of God is just a detail, so to speak, in a Trial that includes about twenty principal steps. "What's happening to the Trial?" often ask the brothers; "Is the beatification for 1960?" If there are 20 steps till canonization, the Cause of Venerable de la Mennais has reached only the 10th one. However, here, the numbers may be misleading, because we have walked much more than half the road: the longest steps seem to be over. Let's have a quick glance at what is already over, before examining, in details, the stage we have reached.

On October 7, 1899, in the chapel of Ploërmel, - you have read it in the "Ménologe", - for the first time, the diocesan Tribunal in charge of the first Information takes place, 86 meetings between October 1899 and August 1901, that's an average of one meeting a week, 55 witnesses among whom all or almost all have known the Servant of God; some remain in the hot seat during many meetings. Four handwritten volumes, in-4° (800 pages each) contain the "procès-verbal" of this first examination, which means a text of 3,200 pages.

On the order of the Sacred Congregation of the Rites, the Tribunal starts simultaneously the search for his writings: the archbishop of Rennes, the bishops of St.Brieuc and of Vannes send mandates to ask the diocesans to give, or at least lend, so that copies may be made, all the handwritten texts of the Servant of God they possess.

As it was mentioned previously, the canonical recognition of the remains was at the core itself of the inquiry of the Ordinary. Before the 1903 debacle, Reverend Brother Abel takes time to go to the Eternal City, in order to drop off the collected statements and documents. The prelates of the Sacred Congregation of the Rites tackle these statements, to see if it's worth starting the proceedings, and the documents are given to three theologians for examination. In December 1907, first victory: despite objections from the Promoter of the Faith,

the Cardinals of the Rites recognize that the writings of the Servant of God do not contain any doctrinal error: the trial for the writings is won.

A few years later, everything well examined, His Holiness Pius X signs, on March 22, 1911, the decree on the introduction of the Cause, which means that the Sacred Congregation of the Rites, from now on, is in charge of the Trial; in the future, she only will have authority to continue the Cause, and the Ordinary cannot do anything. According to the legislation in vigor at that time, the Servant of God, from this day on, has the right to be called Venerable.

However, the congregation of the Rites continue to call on local statements: she forms for each one of the partial trials she undertakes a new diocesan court. Always the same procedure till canonization: each trial consists of four main parts: 1st inquiry in the diocese; 2nd examination in Rome on the procedure of the inquiry and its results; 3rd objections from the Promoter of the Faith and reply of the advocate for the Cause; 4th judgement, or rather decree. As soon as 1911, the witnesses' interrogation resumes in Brittany and lasts three years.

Then, a black cloud appears suddenly, foreboding a storm: a priest, probably well-intentioned, who has never known personally the Servant of God, makes it a point of giving evidence against him. What a chance for "the devil's advocate"!

For about 15 years (1911-1926), statements, proceedings, objections, replies, "remissorial" letters, and so on, accumulate, forming a pile, if not a muddle, so big that it's difficult for the uninitiated to understand. The 1914 war brings new mishaps. The Data of the diocesan trials do not arrive; those of the 3rd trial are filed in Rome before those of the 2nd one, while the Sacred Congregation must necessarily continue the 2nd trial before the 3rd one, and so on.

Many incidents happen. When they need to approve the inquiry on the reputation of holiness, the Cardinals cannot do it, on account of a technical point: two witnesses, in Vannes, were cross-examined by only two Judges while three are necessary; consequently the inquiry is worthless. Since the content does not give rise to any objections, His Em. the Cardinal Prefect of the Rites decide to ask the Supreme Pontiff for an approbation, that is the regularization of what has been done irregularly, so as to avoid the cancellation of the whole trial. The Supreme Pontiff refuses point-blank: The Pope was Pius XI, and you know that he did not "pull his punches". Then, the devil's advocate becomes the saints' advocate and says, "His Em. the Cardinal Prefect does not know the problem in all its details: I know it better than he. I shall go and see the Supreme Pontiff, and explain the whole thing... " It's his turn to call on Pius XI and he asks for the approbation: "No, no", answers the Pope, "no approbation!..." The problem was finally solved, since, one year later, the doubtful decree is signed. (Anyway, it took one year.)

The report on "non cultu" ends favorably in 1915. The trial on the reputation of holiness ends in 1924. From 1924 to 1927, witnesses in the diocese of Vannes are cross-examined... It's probably the beginning of the trial on "héroïcité des vertus". Then, a long period of silence, cut in 1936, with the decree on the approbation of the "Information", a silence prolonged by a new World War.

II – PRESENT SITUATION

Yet, two trials remain before beatification: that of the “*héroïcité des vertus*”, and that of the miracles. They are the two most important ones; in the others, in fact, a simple meeting of the cardinals of the Rites is enough for approval. In the two remaining trials, they need three meetings which will be called: ante-preparatory, preparatory and general congregations.

What is this trial on the “*héroïcité des vertus*”? It consists in proving that the Servant of God has practiced virtues up to a heroic degree, not in an ordinary way. The proof for virtues in general, seems relatively easy. But that’s not all. After having proved the virtues in general, the Advocate must start again for each one in particular of the three theological virtues and the four cardinal ones. Maybe, it’s still easy to show that the founder of a congregation practiced to a degree not very ordinary the virtues of Faith and Force, but how to give a demonstration (the 10th or 11th) about Temperance? Moreover, the devil’s advocate takes advantage of the smaller details, favorable to his objections (that’s his work), and he seems to have the right to intervene in all stages of the trial, which always delays the progress, since we need to start with answering him each time. The Cause progresses only when he has used up in vain his stock of objections.

That’s what the trial of the “*héroïcité des vertus*” is all about, and that’s where the Cause of O. V. Father has come to. We have been at this stage maybe for 30 years, and certainly there will be no way out within a year or two. Let’s hasten to notice that this Cause is not desperate for all that, and that Venerable de la Mennais is in good company. For St. Grignon of Montfort, it took 50 years, from the decree on venerability till that on beatification; for St. Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, 48 years, and for Blessed Champagnat, 49 years.

The special difficulty of this trial explains partly, with the war, the slow work between 1927 and around 1945. The Advocate of the Cause, almost at a loss, begs for the Brothers’ help, and Bro. Hippolyte-Victor is given the job of backing him up. Unfortunately, hostilities interrupted postal communications, and only too brief a résumé of the objections to be refuted, reaches Brittany. Moreover, the archives from where the unfavorable depositions were exhumed, remain hermetically closed: we need an intervention of the Sacred Congregation of the Rites, so that the Brothers of Christian Instruction, after a long wait, may be allowed to consult them. The ante-preparatory meeting finally takes place on July 23 1946, and on the following day, a telegram from Rome announces the happy ending to the Superiors and delegates who begin to gather at Ploërmel, for the General Chapter.

Let’s move forward to the preparatory congregation! But the Promoter of the Faith does not admit defeat. And first, he demands that the Historical Section gets to the bottom of all the obscure points of the life of the Servant of God.

The Sacred Congregation of the Rites, actually, is divided in three sections, under the cardinals’ high authority, since they are the ones, mainly, who form a Roman congregation. The S. C. of the Rites includes from 20 to 25 cardinals, among them, especially those we may know, are Cardinal Feltin, from Paris; Cardinal Pla y Deniel, from Toledo; Cardinal Léger, from Montreal. Apart from the three sections, there are also a secretariat and a chancery.

The first section takes care of the Causes of beatification and canonization. The members of this section are: some prelates, like the Promoter and Assistant-Promoter of the Faith, some theologians, and 10 to 12 consultants, who are also theologians, but who don't work regularly in the offices of the Sacred Congregation.

To the second section, consisting of a team similar to the first one, but of different members, they entrust everything that concerns Liturgy, therefore it's called by the general name of Congregation of the Rites.

The third section is less known than the two previous ones, having been established recently: it goes back to 1930. It's made of 5 or 6 scholars, whose humble title is office assistants, and 10 to 13 consultants, not including the commissions, temporary and permanent. Officially called Historical Section, it's in charge of two things. First, it corrects the liturgical books, - and this can go far: for example, it drew a first plan for the reform of the Holy Week, around 1951. And second, it examines the causes of beatification and canonization started after the death of all the witnesses, and also, those bringing up historical difficulties whose solution requires specialists.

Since a few years ago, the Cause of O. V. Father has been submitted to this third section, and since then, the first section cannot do anything for its progress, neither can the Advocate.

A Reporter was assigned to examine it. Due to the complexity of this cause, (especially on account of the family connection of our Father with Féli de la Mennais), the Reporter believes it's a must to require some help from a qualified expert.

Here comes a religious who seemed to be predestined for a very particular mission: to defend and to recall Jean-Marie de la Mennais: that's Bro. Hippolyte-Victor Géreux. For many years, this "dearly beloved" brother dedicated all his life to the cause that became to him dearer and dearer. At the end of 1946, Bro. Hippolyte-Victor arrives in Rome, as district attorney of the Brothers of Christian Instruction near the Holy See, and Procurator. Soon after that, he receives from the Historical Section a list of points to clarify. He begins courageously his work, - we are tempted to say cheerfully, because he always finds his happiness in working for either one of the two La Mennais. His fantastic memory and remarkable knowledge of questions to be dealt with, serve him admirably: as soon as an objection is submitted to him, he usually finds an answer on the spot, and knows precisely where he can find favorable statements, and documents...

Answering the questions from the Historical Section requires from him nearly 10 years of minute work and attention, including three or four trips to France and Jersey, and consultations in about 20 libraries or archive centers: in Paris, Jersey, many places in Brittany, Belgium, Rome and at the Vatican. Another Postulator would do the work differently, probably, maybe more quickly and in a shorter time, but certainly not better as a whole. Sometimes, the tone of his voice is highly passionate, not enough deprived of controversial accent... What do you want? He cannot get to the point of finding an excuse for the opponents of his beloved Father... But especially, we feel, while reading his texts, his sense of fiery devotion and filial veneration he nourishes for the Servant of God.

After all, the result of his work is highly appreciated by the Historical Section. “He knows about mennaisian problems more than anyone else”, would declare in substance the Reporter, and without his help, we would not have succeeded in drafting the Report, as we did it...”

Mgr Frutaz, Reporter of the Cause to the Historical Section, received Bro. Hippolyte’s handwritten text, maybe two years ago. Mgr Frutaz is an Italian, born at Vallée d’Aoste, and in his village everybody speaks French. He is a historian. A few years ago, he was the secretary for the Committee of redaction of the great Catholic Encyclopedia in Italian, published in 7 or 8 volumes, and wrote some notes. His last two work for the Sacred Congregation deal, one with the Besançon Martyrs, victims during the French Revolution, the other one with Mrs. Seton, an American protestant, converted to Catholicism and a disciple of Mgr Bruté de Rémur, founder a religious congregation, always flourishing.

Mgr Frutaz goes over all the points handled by Bro. Hippolyte, and, in turn, doesn’t write a refutation, but historical reports. He draws, of course, his inspiration from the Postulator’s work, since he has been asked for that, but his text is not, in any way, a summary, contrary to Advocates’ habits, in the previous cases. He writes reports quite personal and original. On many secondary points, he diverges from that of the Postulator, or even contradicts him, although it’s rather rare. He requests comments from him, attaches the greatest importance to them, but... he doesn’t always follow them! These detailed differences, in the two view points, should reassure us. The two writers, in fact, have worked their separate ways: causing unavoidable altercations. But they agree on all main points: therefore, the solution they present must be the good one that will be accepted.

In accordance with the rules of the Historical Section, the work of Mgr the Reporter remains within a strictly scientific and historical ground: it’s objective. The writer must not even reveal where his preferences go. The text is written in Italian, and will consist of maybe three or four hundred printed pages. The documents are not translated and almost all of them are written in French. There could be as many as 500 pages. Thanks to the patience of Bro. Donat-Alphonse, Secretary General, who kept working throughout the vacation, and because of his swiftness when he copies documents or searches for marks of documents, Mgr Frutaz’s report could be completed last July. The Very Reverend Father Antonelli, Reporter General of the Section, must add a “Position” to it. The work has actually reached the printer’s.

What’s left before we come to beatification? Not too much: two meetings, one trial. Mgr Frutaz’s bulky report will surely not be printed before Christmas 1958; last week, the Procurator General had not yet received the first proofs. How could we wish the printers work, at the Vatican, when some light smoke with a blurred color starts rising above the Sistine Chapel? When it’s published, the volume will be distributed to cardinals, prelates and theologians concerned with the cause. All being ready, there will be a meeting of the preparatory congregation. (We remind you that the ante-preparatory one took place in 1946.) The date will mainly depend, I think, on the Promoter of the Faith; well, a few months ago, one of the shelves in his library was filled with exciting bulky volumes; so, it will take, for sure, a miracle for the report on Venerable de la Mennais, to be accepted before its turn.

Who is present at this second meeting? The cardinals, members of the Rites, if they are in Rome, the prelates of the Rites, the Promoter and Assistant-Promoter of the Faith, the consultants. But, neither the Prosecutor of the Cause, nor the Postulator can be present. The Cause is backed up by the Cardinal Ponent, the reporter of the Cause within the congregations. Our new Ponent (because Cardinal Verde passed away a few months ago) will be His Em. Cardinal Tisserand, who, himself, is not involved in the S. C. of the Rites.

The question is asked at the beginning of the meeting, in the form of a doubt to solve: something like this: “Is it suitable or not, given what we know at the moment from our information, to let the Cause of the Servant of God Jean-Marie de la Mennais progress? At the end of the meeting, the answer is called for by only the cardinals’ vote: yes or no.

This preparatory congregation will be followed by the general one. We hope that, after this 10 or 12 years’ long stop at the Historical Section, the Promoter of the Faith will not find anything to criticize, so that the last meeting will not be delayed too much.

Who is present at the general congregation? This meeting does not take place at the Congregation of the Rites, but at the Vatican, and the Supreme Pontiff takes part in it, with all the members of the preparatory congregation. The doubt is formulated like previously. But, the cardinals’ vote is only consultative, no longer deliberative, which means that the Pope alone takes the decision. If he is in favor, he orders the reading of the decree on the “*héroïcité des vertus*”.

This reading is not yet the beatification, but it’s already a solemn ceremony. Ahead of time, it is announced in the *Observatore Romano*. The Supreme Pontiff walks down to one of the rooms in the Vatican, where the cardinal Ponent, the Prosecutor of the Cause and the Postulator have already gathered. They read publicly the decree in front of the Pope, to whom the Postulator makes, then, a speech to thank him. The Pope himself may speak very highly of the Servant of God. Then, the Acts of the Holy See, many magazines and Catholic newspapers give notice of the good news to the Christian world.

That’s what we wish to obtain in 1960, what we need to implore untiringly from the Divine Providence: the end of the trial and the reading of the decree on the “*héroïcité des vertus*”.

The trial about the miracles completes the series. For the founder of a congregation, two miracles are sufficient, but if one of the two is rejected, we need two other miracles to replace it. Therefore, we had better have many set aside! Like previously, there is an inquiry in each one of the dioceses where the favors with a miraculous “character” happened; then examination in Rome, with theologians and doctors. After that, it’s the regular proceeding: objections and answers, ante-preparatory, preparatory, and general meetings.

After the trial about the miracles, there is still one supplementary meeting, in front of the Supreme Pontiff, where they examine if they can proceed in total safety to the beatification. As the phrase says in total safety, the meeting is called: *De tuto*.

Then, the Pope orders the beatification. And the magnificent ceremony taking place later at St.Peter’s in Rome consists mainly in the public reading of the decree on beatification.

After beatification, two miracles will be asked for from the new blessed person, and the two more convincing will be chosen; a second trial on the miracles will take place, exactly similar to the first one. There will be again an additional meeting *De tuto*, followed by three consistories. At the end of the third one, the Pope will give notice of the canonization. The ceremony of canonization is still more magnificent than that of beatification.

CONCLUSION

We have just described the various phases of the Trial of O. V. Father, some being completed, others going on or to come. What conclusion should we draw from all that?

Theologians maintain that every person may be responsible for Our Lord's death, responsible for the conversion and evangelization of the world, as if he were the only one on earth... Well, now then! Each one of us is also responsible for the progress of the Cause of Venerable de la Mennais. It depends on everyone of us whether the Cause progresses or not. We may work to make known the Father around us, to invite with discretion, parents and friends to have confidence in his intercession, to recommend their intentions to him. But, other things are possible, often easier and also more important. Each one of our fervent prayers, mortifications, ordinary and well-sanctified actions may help to hasten the time of the final glorification, - but each one of our faults may delay it.

Of course, all that is not perfectly obvious. God hears our prayer and He does what pleases Him. Taking into account this truth, it remains that each one of us may feel responsible, to a small degree, for the progress or the delay of the Cause. May my daily prayer be more fervent, my sacrifices more generous, my ordinary actions holier, and, through the lowliest life, I shall have worked efficiently to the successful and speedy outcome of the Trial on the Beatification of Venerable de la Mennais.

BROTHER HUBERT-MARIE LIBERT.

LIST OF THE MAIN DATES CONCERNING THE TRIAL

- 1895 Decision of the Council of the Institute.
- 1899 Opening of the Trial of the Ordinary at Ploërmel.
- 1907 End of the Trial about the writings.
- 1911 Decree on the Introduction of the Cause.
- 1915 End of the Trial on "non cultu".
- 1924 End of the Trial on Reputation of Holiness.
- 1946 Trial on the "héroïcité des vertus": ante-preparatory congregation, : preparatory congregation.
- 1966 General Congregation (end of trial).
 - ? End of the Trial on miracles and beatification.
 - ? End of the 2nd Trial on miracles and canonization.

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