

**HISTORICAL RECORD OF THE CAUSE
OF BEATIFICATION AND CANONIZATION
OF FATHER JEAN-MARIE ROBERT DE LA MENNAIS
(1780-1860)**

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By Brother Jean Le Bihan, Postulator.

Preface.

A word to get familiar with some terms used in such a case. So, "Cause" must be understood with the meaning it has in legal affairs, like "trial" (or "proceedings") against a person, to check if his reputation of holiness may be proved according to the norms of the Church.

Since there is, at the end, a "judg(e)ment", it must be preceded by an "examination", done, first, by a "tribunal", said "of information", prepared by the Bishop of the diocese where the concerned person lived. The task of this tribunal is to summon and listen to the "witnesses", favorable or not, having lived or having been in touch with the person involved, or having collected accounts of such dead witnesses.

Meanwhile, the letters and other writings of the person concerned must be searched for and added to the files of the Cause for which they will represent, in some cases, an important factor for the conclusion. In order to have the Cause followed by a responsible person, they assign, with the approval of the competent authority, a "Postulator". The whole work for the progress of the trial does not fall on him, but it comes within the scope of his duties, to choose an "advocate" and to give him the documents which will give weight to his speech for the defense and will allow the "reporter" (or "recorder") or "ponent" of the Cause to refute victoriously the "animadversions" or objections of the "Promoter of the Faith" in front of the judges assigned by the Roman congregation, that of the Rites, yesterday, that of the Causes of Saints, today.

This Congregation is made up, under the presidency of the Cardinal Prefect, of the Cardinals and Bishops assigned by the Supreme Pontiff, gathering according to the need, and of permanent members, secretaries and undersecretaries assisted by "officers" or "collaborators" and consultants. Depending on the cases which are submitted to her, she calls on "experts", doctors, to examine the cases of healings, said miraculous, historians when the facts belong to history. The files are given to three specialists who don't know one another, and submit separately their report to the Congregation. This latter gets the court together to hear the reporter and asks them, if necessary, all the clarifications before the verdict.

Now, it's time to deal with the Cause we're interested in, that of Jean-Marie Robert de la Mennais, so that we may see the steps covered so far, the encountered difficulties, the overcome obstacles, before speaking of the present situation.

A Long Development.

Mr. de la Mennais died at the end of December 1860. The five Brothers, (Assistants, members of the Council), he had appointed as his successors, elected one of them, Brother Cyprien, to the post of Superior General. It was an answer to the founder's desire, because he had been his intimate associate since 1854. When faced with the attempts to bring to life again the deceased "Father", Bro. Cyprien let always a certain disappointment show, and explained, "To describe him

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exactly, you need to have seen him at work, to have jumped at the sound of his voice, to have especially experienced the infinite affection of his heart. Nobody can mention twice the influence

he had for all of us, thanks to his ardent zeal, moderated with a tact filled with subtlety and an admirable gentleness (1)".

A Time to Stand By

Facing this veneration for a beloved Father, we can ask ourselves why Bro. Cyprien didn't rely immediately on the reputation of holiness of Venerable de la Mennais whose uninterrupted procession of Ploërmel residents in front of his body lying in state, the spontaneous gestures of the mothers who had their children touch it, were only the most obvious expressions to start the process of the official recognition of his sanctity.

The reason is that we don't replace overnight a Mr. de la Mennais as the head of a Congregation he had founded and had been running for 40 years, a Congregation still young, but which included 852 members, among whom 154 were in the "missions", in the French colonies at that time, managing 349 schools and houses to which were added foundations in Haiti and Canada. And, at the same time, according to the instructions left by Father, himself, to organize the Institute for her approval by Rome. That was not all, after the test of the 1870 war, there came the threat and implementation of secularization of the education system, starting with that of the teachers with the results you can imagine.

However, the idea of the founder's glorification remained in his mind. He unburdened himself officially to the members of his Council, on April 7 1895, in the following report, "The Rev. Bro. Superior General explains to the Council of the Institute that, for a long time, he has had in mind to introduce the Cause of beatification of our venerated Father and founder. He believes it's the appropriate time to start the process(2)". This Council included, among its members, a young assistant, dynamic as we say, who had, for our "Father" a very old veneration. He would have the opportunity to show it, in broad daylight, before long.

Bro. Abel in Action.

Elected Superior General of the Brothers, at the Chapter of 1897, after the death of Rev. Bro. Cyprien, he brought, on the moment, the Capitulants in on his request to the Bishop of Vannes, Bishop Bécél, to accept starting, as soon as possible, the informative processes (3).

Being sure of the success of his request, the Council of the Institute had already obtained the bishop's approval of the appointment of the first Postulator of the Cause, R. F. Nicolet, Procurator General of the Marist Fathers, near the Holy See, former Superior of the Great Seminary of St. Briec. Hoping to gain the best supports, Rev. Bro. Abel travels to Rome, as soon as March 1898, in order to explain to the Pope, Léon XIII, the position of the Institute, as well as to request from the Holy Father the glorification of Father de la Mennais, which was much longed for. After mentioning the memory of Bishop Bécél who died recently, he adds, "May I dare ask your Holiness a very special blessing for a Cause that is so dear in the hearts of two religious families? It would be for us such a great joy..." (4).

The ground being ready, Bro. Abel begins to take the official steps for the introduction of the Cause, that is the constitution, in our chapel of Ploërmel, of the “informative tribunal”, by the Bishop of Vannes, Bishop Latieule, on October 7 1899. From his address, I just extract this passage: “It’s a great work the tribunal undertakes, since it’s a question of glorifying, if the Church agrees, this great Servant of God, the Lord’s chosen one.”

La Semaine Religieuse de Vannes, on October 14 1899, which gives a report on the event, makes known the names of the members of the tribunal, consisting of : Judge: Canon L. Rabgeau, archpriest of Ploërmel; assistant-judges: Canon L. Barré, dean of Mauron, Canon L. Simon, dean of Josselin, Father Collet and Father Morice, respectively chaplains of the Mother-House and of the Ursulines; promoters: Canon Dubot, doctor in theology, Superior of the Little Seminary of Ploërmel, and Father Fleury, chaplain of the Mother-House; notary: Father Mathorel, head chaplain of the Mother-House, all names known and respected by those familiar with the religious history of Ploërmel and the region.

The permanent Postulator, R. F. Nicolet, was present. To avoid long trips from Ploërmel to Rome, Bro. Yriez-Marie, first assistant of the F.I.C.’s, joined him, with the title of “Pro-Postulator”. The Tribunal that had secured the services of a “cursor”, Mr. Yves-Marie Caroff, from Ploërmel, could take up his duties, that is to collect the statements of all those whom he considered necessary to hear so as to investigate the Cause. In fact, he was on the board for about two years, till August 29 1901, during which he was in charge of 86 sessions hearing the depositions of 55 witnesses, which were recorded in a bulky volume of 1,972 handwritten pages.

The Witnesses.

It’s not useful to name all of them, but, at least, we must recall two of them because they have provided for the Cause almost all the documents: Bro. Abel, at that time, Superior General of the Brothers of Christian Instruction, and Canon Pierre du Bois de la Villebarel, first secretary at the Bishopric of St.Brieuc, and then director of “the Semaine Religieuse”, and finally Vicar General of the diocese, before becoming the Bishop.

His deposition, prepared at great length, fills up 858 pages out of 1,632 pages of the public copy of the Acts of the trial. Come to that, he had drawn his documentation on the best sources: familial archives, those of the Bishopric of St.Brieuc, which revealed to him the extent of the apostolic work of the Servant of God, at the time he was, for more than four years, one of the Vicars General of the Chapter, the archives of the Brothers of Christian Instruction, at Ploërmel...

It’s from the same source that Bro. Abel got, quite naturally, information. Arrived at Ploërmel, a short time after Mr. de la Mennais’s death, he spent, first, 8 years there, teaching the Postulants. At this time, his enthusiastic admiration for the “Father” begins. It will keep on growing and deepening, being in constant contact with Brothers who had lived intimately with the founder, such as Brothers André, Hippolyte, Jérôme, Paul (d’Auch), all the Brothers who had lived at the beginning of the Congregation; finally, he came into contact with numerous personalities, guests of the Mother-House, at the time of Mr. de la Mennais, and will quote their statements, “word for word”, according to his expression.

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So, Bro. Abel could enrich the “Records” of the trial, 357 pages about which Bishop A. P. Frutaz, undersecretary of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, notes, in his preface of the “Summarium additionale”, that his deposition is based on full and reliable information. That’s why he regrets that, “from this deposition, ‘Position on Vertues’ has omitted to mention important passages and a good number of documents which could have helped to show to advantage the

features of the Servant of God” and have avoided, that arise, later on, certain “animadversions” which delayed much the progress of the trial. Bishop Frutaz passes the same remark about the insufficiently exploited contribution of Canon du Bois de la Villerabel.

These two privileged witnesses’ admiration for Mr. de la Mennais, only expressed, in fact, the Brothers’ unanimous feeling as Bro. Hippolyte Morin attests, “Our Venerable Father did guide all his children’s conscience and their trust in him was so great that, even during the retreats, everybody wanted to speak to him; it’s only when we had become quite numerous that they agreed on sharing and, even then, for many consecutive years, we noticed that he, alone, was seeing as many people as all the other confessors put together” (5). Meanwhile, on August 6 1900, during an imposing and touching ceremony, the recognition and transfer of the remains of Mr. de la Mennais, from the community graveyard to the chapel of the Mother-House, took place.

SECOND STEP

DEPOSITION OF THE DOCUMENTS OF THE DIOCESAN TRIAL TO THE S. C. OF THE RITES

However, in spite of the threats which accumulated on the political horizon, against the Congregation, acknowledging that he was right, and having a strong faith, Bro. Abel left right away for Rome. On September 4 1901, he handed in, in the offices of the Sacred Congregation of the Rites, the documents of the diocesan trial, before the opening of the apostolic trial. Just before this official step, the new Postulator, R. F. Le Cerf, also a Marist priest, had requested the nomination of a “Ponent” or recorder for the Cause. Cardinal Vincent Vannutelli, the brother of Cardinal Séraphin Vannutelli, Protector of our Congregation near the Holy See, was chosen.

Quest for the Writings.

The S. C. of the Rites had, on the other hand, ordered a quest for the writings of Mr. de la Mennais, in a decree on March 27 1900. As for Cardinal Labouré, Archbishop of Rennes, he had assigned, on May 18 1900, a committee for the same purpose, in his diocese. The presidency was entrusted to R. F. Gille, Superior General of the Missionaries of Immaculate Conception. The report was presented to the Cardinal, dated August 30 1905, that is more than 5 years after the committee was assigned. The committee explain the delays the following way: the 1901 law against religious Congregations had forced one of them to go on many trips abroad... Bishop Fallières, Bishop of St. Briec and Tréguier, and Bishop Latiéule, Bishop of Vannes, had given the same reasons for their dioceses.

Altogether the collected texts amount to 4,935 letters, 2,920 pages of homilies, and other writings to be submitted to the experts of the S. C. of the Rites.

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As far as he is concerned, in spite of the terrible ordeal of the dissolution of the Congregation, in France, and the despoiling of her properties, Bro. Abel didn’t lose sight of the Cause which was so dear to him that it made him share with the Father, a suffering that had been his for such a long time.

In 1907, he travels to Rome, and stays there a whole month. On February 8, he is granted a long, private audience with H. H. Pius X, who, according to the account of Bro. Abel himself, had, for

the suffering Superior General, comforting words, expressing confidence in a better future (6). Bishop Amédée Latieule, Bishop of Vannes (1898-1903), calls, many times, particularly on T. E. Cardinals Vincent and Séraphin Vannutelli who will be full of consideration for him. He notices that August 27 will be the day when “Mgr the Advocate will reply to the ‘animadversions’ about the writings of the Servant of God, submitted by Mgr the Promoter of the Faith”.

Nihil obstat Related to the Writings.

Actually, it will be only on December 10 1907 that the aforesaid Nihil obstat will be issued. So, in the decision of the S. C. of the Rites, nothing against the teaching of the Church was noted in our founder’s writings.

Bro. Abel being absent, the good news was announced to the Brothers in a circular from the Assistants, as soon as December 16 1907. The Echo of the Missions, in January 1908, will mention it again, and Rev. Bro. Superior General, in his circular N° 126, of May 1908, will add the following comment to emphasize the importance of the Roman decision for the Brothers themselves.

“Another reason”, he says, “must make us love and venerate our good Father’s writings: he is our founder. Well, our founder is for his institute, for what concerns spiritual and religious life, what a father is for his family, for what concerns natural life, the author and like the principle of life.”

The life of every religious society is, in a general way, based on the spirit of the Gospel, and, more especially, the true spirit that has inspired her establishment, presided over her birth and satisfied her first members. This living spirit, without which there is nothing but death for her, God, through an ordinary predisposition, through a grace proportioned to his intentions for this Society herself, makes it dwell eminently in the founder. He fills our Father’s soul with the spirit that can animate, and can distinguish the children; so, He gives each religious Institute the elements and means necessary for a continuous reform.”

“Whatever the spent time and the lost ground may be, we need only, in order to remain steady or recover and prove equal to our vocation and duty, to go back to the source, to return to the original spirit, to be again fully aware of the founder’s spirit.”

“I am convinced that, like other founders, our Venerable Father de la Mennais was filled with the spirit, characteristic of our Congregation whose Father he has been, whose source he is for her, and that she must always return to him in order to plunge back into it and grow young again.” Circular N° 126, pp. 66 and 67.

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A Decisive Step : Introduction of the Cause at the Tribunal of Rome.

On March 21 1911, the Cardinal Ponent, Vincent Vannutelli, at the ordinary session of the S. C. of the Rites, cast doubt, that is the following question: “Must we assign a Committee for the introduction of the Cause and the purpose concerned?” As you guess, the problem was whether we continue or stop the Cause of our Father after the elaborate examination of a *Positio super introductione causam*, which, besides 718 pages of statements, consisted also of 128 postulating letters to the Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, Superiors of monasteries and of various Orders, all in favor.

After the report of Cardinal V. Vannutelli, after having heard, orally or in writing, Mgr Verde, Promoter General of the Faith, the official judges replied in the affirmative.

Right the following day, March 22, “in connection with Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation, Pope Pius X assigned the Committee for the Introduction of the Cause of beatification and canonization of the Servant of God, Jean-Marie Robert de la Mennais” (7).

With this decision, the Church declared that the Cause of our Founder was worth of holding Her attention, having in mind the serious examination, based on an official recognition of the heroic practice of virtues of the person to whom She gave the title of Venerable.

Bro. Abel was not there to share the joy of his Brothers and of many others. Consumed with grief, felled by sickness, he died in February 1910, in Jersey.

However, it was only right to pay homage to him for the important part he played, first, showing to advantage and taking into consideration the Cause, then, following its progress before taking it to the treshold of its official recognition by the Church.

Brother Jean Le Bihan

The Chronicle N° 300, October 1979, p. 293-301

La Correspondance Catholique, May 23 1895, p. 407.

Circular N° 108 of R. B. Abel, p. 124.

(3) Idem, p. 126.

(4) Circular, N° 103, p. 5.

(5) Relation, diocesan trial, p. 1235.

(6) Circular of Bro. Abel, N° 125, p. 58.

(7) Circular of Bro. Jean-Joseph, N° 135, pp. 93 and so on.

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**HISTORICAL REPORT ON THE CAUSE OF Beatification and Canonization
Of Father Jean-Marie Robert de la Mennais (1780-1860) (Second Part)
Brother Jean LE BIHAN, Postulator of the Cause, Rome.**

The Cause of Mr. de la Mennais, introduced at the Court of Rome, will enter its main stage, and be submitted to what we call “apostolic trials” (or proceedings), as they are examined in the name of the Pope by the S. C. of the Rites, the Bishop of the “Ordinary Trial” not stepping in except as the delegated judge. In these trials, they will judge:

1. Whether a public cult has been given or not to the Servant of God or trial on non cultu;
2. Whether his reputation of sanctity or fama sanctitatis is sufficiently solid or not;
3. Especially whether his life has been or has not been, not only irreproachable, but, besides that, if he has practiced or not the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, the cardinal virtues of

prudence, justice, temperance, and force, as well as the connected virtues, not only at an ordinary level, but up to a heroic degree.

This dangerous obstacle is, more over, repeated, since the “Position About the Vertues” will be submitted to a triple examination, first in the Congregation called “ante-preparatory” where the Reporter and the Promoter General of the Faith will confront each other before the Consultants alone, or, in order not to dramatize, the arguments, favorable to his thesis, submitted by the Reporter, are discussed by the Promoter of the Faith who, what’s more, may emit (some) “animadversions” or objections to which there had been no replies in the Reporter’s statements. When the latter thinks he has collected documents suitable to refute the aforesaid animadversions, it is often prudent to submit all of it to experts, for example, those of the Historical Section of the Congregation. Their reports having been submitted to whom it may concern, the motivated advices of the theologian consultants having been collected, the Cardinal Prefect of the S. C. of the Rites convene the Cardinals and Prelates members, for the preparatory Congregation, for a debate where Reporter and Promoter of the Faith will make the most of their respective arguments. If the judgment is affirmative, the Cause will be examined in a third Congregation, said “general”, where, the Pope being present, the Cardinals members, Prelates and Consultants will be on the bench with the Cardinal Prefect. In case of a favorable decision, the conclusion, finally reached, will be a Decree proclaiming the “héroïcité des vertus” of the Venerable. The official publication will be made later, during a meeting, always with the Pope being present, and, where, with the members already mentioned of the S. C. of the Rites, the Postulator of the Cause will be invited. For him, it will be the best reward for his work and steps...Then, there will remain, with the same processus, the examination of the proceedings on the miraculous occurrences attributed to the Servant of God.

Let’s see, now, how Father de la Mennais has faced the different phases of what forms one and the same, continuous trial. The new Tribunal put into office by Bishop Gouraud, Bishop of Vannes, delegated by the authority of the S. C. of the Rites, had first to make inquiries about a possible public cult given to the Servant of God. So, let’s take an example, during the imposing ceremony of the transfer of the remains of Mr. de la Mennais from the community graveyard to the chapel. The answer was given to us by the Vicar-General Dieulangard, himself, president of the Tribunal. “The Vicar-General presided the ceremony and made sure that no honors pertaining to worship would be given, the proof is that he had people stand,

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when they were going to kneel, a custom practiced rather generally in Brittany during funerals”(1). As Mr. Zudaire, an attorney, former Mayor of Ploërmel, had said before the Tribunal, “I believe I know all the portraits of Mr. de la Mennais, pictures, boards, sculptures or paintings and none of these representations bear the least mark, indicating the quality of a Blessed or a Saint. I am more at ease than anyone to speak about this question, since I have spent all my life being on close terms with the Brothers” (2). No doubts, the feasts of the “Venerability” at St.Brieuc, celebrating the introduction of the Cause, were during the long triduum of thanksgiving (February 9,10 and 11 1912), an expression rather unusual of gratitude from the whole crowd and their priests to a great benefactor of the diocese and of Brittany. But Bishop Morelle, Bishop of St.Brieuc and Tréguier, in a pastoral letter prescribing them (the ceremonies), and which is a true masterpiece of oratory, pays an astonishing homage to the life of Mr. de la Mennais, but mentions that it will not be question of “rendering our Venerable public honors condemned by the wise prudence of the Church, but of offering to God our thanksgiving for the hope He allows us to think that the day will come when our piety is obliged to less reserve” (Echo of Missions, March 1912, p. 23). So, the trial on non

cultu, that had begun on July 31 1912, ended up, in spite of the hazards of the First World War, with a favorable sentence from the S. C. of the Rites, on March 9 1915.

The “Fama sanctitatis”

We shall have to wait till 1920 when the examination on the reputation of holiness of Mr. de la Mennais ends. The statements collected by the Tribunal, expressed in different words, are unanimous. So, Father Jean Coto testifies he “has a great devotion to the Servant of God” and adds that “it’s the same for people of all classes...”

This statement is corroborated, for example, by Canon Le Gaillard, parish priest of Ploërmel, who puts it this way, “The Venerable has always been considered a man of very high virtue, and that, by everybody... We should not be surprised to see him beatified. It’s the opinion of all, among the people as well as the “grave” (sic) persons: I don’t have names to mention, but it’s the public opinion of which I can testify as the parish priest of Ploërmel” (3). The Decree ratifying the reputation of sanctity of Mr. de la Mennais was published on June 11 1924.

The Trial on Life and Virtues

Those were nothing but examinations that could be qualified as preliminaries. After Father Louis Copéré, Postulator, at the time of the Cause, had composed the “articles of his thesis relating the life and virtues of the Servant of God and the miraculous events attributed to him”, the ecclesiastical Tribunal of Vannes resumes its sessions. Previously, on December 1 1926, he had carried out, in the strictest privacy, the examination of the remains of our Venerable Father. It’s to be noted that the presiding judge, Vicar-General Dieulangard had already represented the Ordinary at the ceremony of exhumation on August 6 1900. 28 witnesses appeared at this new Trial. Although 799 documents had been registered at the ordinary Trial, this time, there were only 17 new ones to be added. The final amount of statements required no less than 1,084 handwritten pages, in two volumes, whose deposit at the chancery of the S. C. of the Rites is dated August 14 1931.

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It’s Brother Philippe de Néri Prigent, Postulator, who had been in charge of it.

A careful examination of the aforesaid informative Trial must then show that all the lawful prescriptions have been complied to. So, this explains why it’s only on June 5 1936 that the Decree recognizing the “validity of the Trial of Vannes” was published.

The new advocate, Mgr Beltrami, “prepared a Summary of 1,900 pages where we find all the documents deposited in 1927; and then, drew the proofs of an “information” meant to establish firmly that the Venerable had practiced Christian virtues to a heroic degree” (4).

“The Summary and the information were submitted to the Promoter General of the Faith, to allow him to prepare his “animadversions”. They were published in 1940, and contain serious objections taken from documents that had been secret till that day. They needed clarification. The Promoter of the Faith suggested to refer the Cause to the Historical Section of the S. C. of the Rites” (5).

The war started again. In spite of it or rather because of it, Bro. Hippolyte-Victor Géréux, a recluse in Jersey, due to the German occupation on the island, had some spare time to study, one after the other, the objections brought up by the Promoter of the Faith. Relying on an order from the S. C. of the Rites, he got in touch with documents that had been till then inaccessible, and completed, by doing so, our archives. Gifted with a rather unusual sense of history, (always) worrying about accuracy, overlooking no details, with a passion for truth that is totally his own, a love for our

“Father”, which went back to the time when Rev. Bro. Abel brought him in his researches on Mr. de la Mennais, Bro. Hippolyte wrote five typed volumes that the Historical Section of the S. C. of the Rites borrowed for two years, so as to make of it a deep study which proved satisfactory.

Mgr Beltrami, advocate of the Cause, being promoted to the rank of Papal Nuncio, his successor was a very active young man, on the way to become well-known to the S. C. of the Rites, Mr. Giulio Dante. In a work containing 2,500 pages in which the material collected by Bro. Hippolyte are partially used, he wrote a thesis he thought sound enough to please the judges. Meanwhile, the new “Position” of the Cause, presented in two volumes containing more than 1,500 pages of text, was distributed to the Consultants of the ante-preparatory Congregation.

The Ante-preparatory Congregation of July 3 1946

The decision was not negative, that would have meant a decision to stop for good the Cause, but as Mgr A. P. Frutaz notes in his Preface of SUMMARY ADDITIONALE out of “Eleven Consultants and official Prelates, only one answered in the affirmative, while others submitted a suspensive vote, not as opposed to the Cause, but in order to obtain clarifications about some points of view on the work of the Servant of God...” (6).

The Promoter General of the Faith, Mgr Natucci, put it the following way in his “New animadversions”, dated August 5 1946: “Nobody can drop the fact that this remarkable Cause presents difficulties among which some at least deserve to be called, not thin clouds, as the Counsel for the defense was pleased to call them, but rather wide and thick ones, which, if they are not totally scattered, might for various reasons worth paying attention to, cover completely the feature of the Servant of God.”

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“This danger, the Counsel for the defense who has noticed it well, and has thought it useful, in order to dispel the clouds that are not thin, to give a Reply whose dimensions went further than foreseen, and whose length itself proves that he was facing circumstances maybe not desperate, but, at least, exceptionally laborious...”

And the Promoter of the Faith added, “Even after this subtle, laborious and worked on Reply, the objections, especially those dealing with Faith, Prudence and Charity, retain all their force, and even, under certain view points, are heightened with the deposit of writings by Father Persehais and Father Feildel...” These two priests, former fellow members of Mr. de la Mennais in the Congregation of Saint-Méen, left two handwritten work, the first one a “Histoire de ladite Congrégation”, the second one some “Annales” in which they implicate directly our Founder as the Promoter of the Faith mentions it. So, let’s see what’s the problem with the objection made about the Faith itself of Mr. de la Mennais. It referred to his position on the philosophical meaning of “common sense”, which was that of Féli. In fact, the disagreement existed only about the question to know if the encyclical *Minari Vos* condemned the system itself or the abuse of it. Father Jean had rallied to the latter opinion. He was wrong and will admit it as soon as he understood the meaning of the Pope’s word. But, can’t we see, in his conduct at that time, anything else but the evolution of an honest soul, that was decided to follow in everything his conscience? (cf. Laveille I, p. 510). As Bro. Hippolyte-Victor notes it: “These last words of the eminent biographer resume admirably the whole behavior of Father Jean-Marie de la Mennais in difficult circumstances. To follow faithfully, forcefully, the information of his conscience, and to do so, to try by all means to enlighten it; then, the spirit once freed from doubts that, at first, hid the full meaning of the words of the Pope, to

maintain without delay or prejudice a humble and complete obedience: such was the attitude, really worth of his soul, so honest and so great, that Venerable Jean-Marie de la Mennais kept continuously during this painful period of his life.” A similar proof could be given about his “prudence” and “charity” towards all, and more especially towards a certain number of his fellow members of the Congregation of Saint-Méen. But, isn’t it better to let Mr. de la Mennais speak himself? Here are some passages of the letter written on August 3 1834, at the time of the mennaisian crisis, to Mr. Meslé, parish priest of the cathedral of Rennes:

“Mr. and Dearest Father, You would not believe how I appreciate the charitable things you want to tell me and the openness, totally warm, with which you write to me, that’s the way a priest should talk to a priest, a friend to a friend. I shall answer you with the same sincerity, and tell you in my turn, that I take offense, like an insult at the doubts some people seem they wish to raise at this moment, about our submission, full, total and without reserve, to the two encyclicals of our Holy Father, Pope Gregory XVI. We have done enough to convince them that we shall never have other doctrines or other teaching, but those of the apostolic Holy See. However, if it still pleases them to worry about us, what shall we do? Shall we quiet down their anxiety in devoting ourselves to think of ourselves as suspicious persons, outside the clergy, and persons who need, in all circumstances, to give special guarantees? Of course, no, and, if we acted that way,

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there would be no reason for that to end, and for the truly painful scenes of the last retreat at Rennes not to be renewed at every moment. I think, my dear friend, that, in times as miserable as ours, when the spirits are wild, prejudiced, embittered, there is only one wise side to take, and here it is: to obey with the simplicity and docility of a little child the authority established by God; to accept all she accepts, to forbid all she forbids without the shadow of a reservation, but not to give up anything to arbitrary demands, blind imagination, passionate whims of people who make themselves the authority: the opposite principle would be a source of troubles and quarrels continuously reawakening, because it’s a principle of anarchy, I would not like to establish, in any way, by my example...” (Laveille: J.-M. de la Mennais I, p.510,511).

« If I have written so long, it’s because some basic problems have come back to surface again. In order to bring an irrefutable answer, besides a historical knowledge of general level, related to the mentioned questions, they needed to have convincing documents, suited to reduce to nothing the allegations at least inexact, not to say the unfair accusations drawn up in the letters and writings of Fathers Coëdro, Persehais and Feildel.” If it was a chance to see, in 1946, Bro. Hippolyte-Victor appointed to the post of Postulator of the Cause, at this difficult moment, it was another chance that the Cause was entrusted to one of the eminent members of the S. C. of the Rites, Mgr A. P. Frutaz who accepted the responsibility confronted with the Historical Section. The present Undersecretary of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints points out in which way their collaboration, both trustful and constant, was formed: “Taking as a starting point the important documentation of the ordinary Trial which, in the meantime, he had enriched with numerous and precious documents, thanks to his repeated research in the archives, he (Bro. Hippolyte) was in a position to submit to me, on Feb. 5 1955, 18 brochures...” “The amount itself of these documents and, sometimes, the tone used when he explained certain questions, induced me to correct the whole documentation of

Bro.... The work was virtually over a few weeks later before the death of Bro. Hippolyte-Victor who could still read, although suffering in his bed, the handwritten last chapter.”

The “Summarium additionale”

The Summarium additionale was born from this collaboration, “fruit of a hard and lengthy work”, consisting of no less than 700 pages of depositions and documents, “published with meticulous care”, such as this letter written by Father Coëdro to Mr. de la Mennais, but not sent, or again the reproduction of “Annales de Saint-Méen”, by Father Feildel, and that of “l’Histoire de la Congrégation de Saint-Méen”, by Father Persehais, both of them, like Father Coëdro, hostile to the Servant of God. So, it’s with confidence that Mgr Frutaz asked the Rev. Consultants of the Historical Section to make themselves acquainted with his work in order to be able to reply to the Animadversions included at the end of the volume. Their advice, he added, reproduced with a special connection, will inform the Rev. Consultants (theologians) who will receive, at the same time, the Summary additionale. The latter, well-informed, will have the duty to pass judgment on the virtues of the Servant of God. This confidence was totally justifiable. On June 3 1960, the Historical Section of the S. C. of the Rites passed a judgment very favorable on the argument developed in the Summarium additionale

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to reply to the last difficulties against the Cause. The theologians will make theirs the judgment of the historian Consultants. The preparatory Congregation will officialize all these justified advices, favorable to the Servant of God, at their meeting on May 25 1965.

However, the Promoter General of the Faith had not said his last word, and brought up, on February 26 1966, what he called himself his “very last Animadversions”, taking care of justifying them the following way:

“The very old custom of this sacred Tribunal tells us enough how complicated and full of difficulties may become the examination of the “héroïcité des vertus” of the Servants of God who have accomplished great things and have often been in touch with society, whereas much simpler are the Causes of those who lived a private life, distant from the worldly business. That’s what is confirmed in the Cause of the Servant of God, Jean-Marie Robert de la Mennais, who, certainly, has done great things and kept up numerous social connections...”

In fact, these objections, mainly, were nothing but those of 1946. Bro. Gabriel-Henri Potier, Postulator of the Cause, at that time, could tell us, however, they had not been refuted previously, and that there was a need to adapt the replies to the objections with new expressions. This will be the work, under the Postulator’s impetus, of Advocate Dante and Procurator Felici, Mgr Frutaz adding his competent support for the revision of their work. This Novissima (et ultima) Positio super Virtutibus was delivered to H. E. Cardinal É. Tisserand who would give a report about it to the members informed of

The General Congregation of June 21 1966

As we know, the matter had a happy outcome, and the Decree was proclaimed by H. H. the Pope, Paul VI, on December 15 1966. The judgment is the following: “ (that) Appears clearly the practice of the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, towards God as well as towards (his) neighbors, and also that of the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and force, as well as that of

the connexed virtues, in the Servant of God, Jean-Marie Robert de la Mennais, founder of the Institute of Brothers of Christian Instruction of Ploërmel and of the Congregation of the Daughters of Providence of St.Brieuc, to a heroic degree in the case and for the purpose concerned". He ordered that this decree must be announced by public law and recorded in the acts of the S. C. for the Causes of Saints.

Officialized by the Church, this recognition of the "héroïcité des vertus" is the last step before beatification, which, according to the present custom, calls for the recognition of miraculous facts, attributed to the Venerable.

Here we are, that is at the treshold of beatification.

Bro. Jean LE BIHAN

The Chronicle N° 301, January 1980, p. 47-59.

References in the second part: (1) Positio super non cultu, last part, p. 6. (2) Positio super non cultu, p. 31. (3) Positio super Fama sanctitatis, p. 77-81. (4) and (5) Circular 210 of Rev. Bro. Gustave-Marie, p.51 and 52. (6) Summarium additionale, p. XI. 58 59.