

RELIGIOUS OBEDIENCE

*“Yes, obedience is better than sacrifice.”
(1 Sam 15, 22)*

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"Above all, try getting used to consider the need for interior obedience, submission of the mind and of the heart, without which outward obedience would be nothing."

(John Mary de la Mennais
to Miss A. Chenu)

"The perfect surrender of oneself and of one's will is the essential quality of a religious."

(John Mary de la Mennais
to Brother Polycarpe, 1836)

INTRODUCTION

In this year of Consecrated Life, I would like to address, in this Circular, an essential dimension of our vocation as Brothers, that of religious obedience¹. We all know how our founder was very much attached to obedience which he had given himself as a rule of conduct. He wrote to Bishop Lesquen in 1834 at the height of trials that befell him: "*With God's grace, I will never walk outside the way of obedience.*" All his life he gave witness to his fidelity, not to say his "*submission*" to the Church, a very unpopular word today, but by which he expressed the radicalism that conveyed his deep desire to do the will of God.

Our founder follows the tradition of those who have influenced the most the way of religious life in the Church throughout the centuries. In the Rule of Saint Benedict, for

¹ The theme chosen for the *La Mennais Études* number 4 can serve as an introduction to the circular letter. *La Mennais Études* is meant for Brothers and Laypeople. Here, the vow of obedience is the road to the will of God for the religious whom we are.

example, we read: *“To thee, therefore, my speech is now directed, who, giving up thine own will, takest up the strong and most excellent arms of obedience, to do battle for Christ the Lord, the true King”*².

I therefore wish to look at the vow of obedience which we profess along with the vows of chastity and of poverty. It is without doubt not easy for a young person to pronounce the vow of celibacy. Today, everything seems subject to experimentation, nothing is final. Commitment in marriage is also a problem. How can people commit themselves to one another for a lifetime and make the decision never to break the bond that, for instance, newlyweds contract between them? Is it possible to better understand the vow of poverty? To serve the poor while sharing their lives can attract the generosity of youth. However, does this necessarily require a vow, to have nothing of one's own, to share everything with Brothers we have not chosen, and this for the rest of our life? It is an arduous step to take if Christ, who readily wishes for an encounter, is not welcomed with love. If he does not change the heart of man, how can one reasonably consider such a way of life?

With the vow of obedience, we stand almost at the opposite of everything that our different cultures propose. While we tend to make individual freedom the ultimate rule without being conscious of its limits and of the human vision it promotes, how can we understand binding ourselves by vow to an institution that is supposed to express the will of God himself? The vow of chastity marks the only link that binds the

² *The Service of Authority and of Obedience*, n° 9, 2008

individual to his creator; the vow of poverty expresses the desire to have no other wealth than God himself. Must we additionally make a vow of obedience to know what the will of God is for us? This is a fundamental question that we will attempt to answer.

It is good to remember, before going any further, that the vow of obedience has a particular meaning for us Brothers. In fact, it was the only vow that we pronounced at the beginning of our common history. It can be enlightening to look back on our origins to better understand the meaning of this vow. Even more than the other two, it invites us to rediscover the intentions of our founders and of the first Brothers. In doing so, we will delve into the heart of our vocation and of our charism, and we will grasp better what is God's specific call to us. As Brothers we must seek to see the beauty of this unique vow that Father de la Mennais asked us to pronounce. We will then see how it introduces us into a more joyful and free exercise of our charism at the service of the Church and of the world.

We will then respond, in some ways, to the demands of the Pope in his introductory letter to the year of Consecrated Life: *"Recounting our history is essential for preserving our identity, for strengthening our unity as a family and our common sense of belonging. More than an exercise in archaeology or the cultivation of mere nostalgia, it calls for following in the footsteps of past generations in order to grasp the high ideals, and the vision and values which inspired them, beginning with the founders and foundresses and the first communities. In this way we come to see how the charism has been lived over the years, the creativity it has sparked, the difficulties it en-*

countered and the concrete ways those difficulties were surmounted. We may also encounter cases of inconsistency, the result of human weakness and even at times a neglect of some essential aspects of the charism. Yet everything proves instructive and, taken as a whole, acts as a summons to conversion. To tell our story is to praise God and to thank him for all his gifts."

We will therefore examine how the choice of this single vow marked our Congregation from the outset. We will then briefly see what specific light it sheds on our charism. Finally, we will seek to highlight the inner attitudes that are expected from all of us for our commitment to bear fruit.

Throughout this circular letter, the service of authority will also be evoked for *"with the intention of doing God's will, authority and obedience are not therefore two distinct realities or things absolutely opposed but rather two dimensions of the same evangelical reality..., two complementary ways of participating in the same oblation of Christ. Authority and obedience are personified in Jesus... Consecrated life intends simply to live His Authority and His Obedience³"*

³ *The Service of Authority and of Obedience*, n° 12

A SOLE VOW

1- The Choice of the Vow of Obedience

The fact that the first Brothers pronounced the sole vow of obedience has a meaning for our Congregation which we cannot ignore if we wish to grasp the call of the Spirit for us. Father de la Mennais hesitated at first. He no doubt discussed matters with Father Gabriel Deshayes and they settled on the choice of the one vow of obedience. A handwritten document by Father de la Mennais prior to 1823 attests to this: *“The Brothers make the vows of chastity, of poverty and of obedience.”* These words are then struck out by himself and replaced: *“They make the sole vow of obedience...”*

For their part, however, the Daughters of Providence of Saint-Brieuc pronounced the three vows from the very foundation. Several years later, Father Gabriel Deshayes will ask the Saint Gabriel Brothers to pronounce the three vows. For the Brothers of Christian Instruction, on the other hand, they will be asked to pronounce a single vow. Was this to replicate

the project of John Baptist de la Salle? Presumably, since the statutes of the Congregation, from the first line, refer to the Brothers of Christian Schools: "*The Brothers of Christian Instruction, like the Brothers of Christian Schools ...*" In any case, the fact of this unique vow is not to be taken lightly since this tradition will not only last throughout the lifetime of the founder, but until 1890. That is when, in fact, the General Chapter will decide to introduce the three vows. The Institute will then be recognized as a religious Congregation in accordance with the Code of Canon Law.

Here, we will not attempt to dwell on the reasons that led our founders to make such a choice⁴. We will seek rather to understand the impact on the style of "government" that followed, and consequently, its influence on the charism itself. The latter, in fact, is the expression of a gift of the Spirit to the world, a life of self-giving. The means decided by the founder or founders, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, define its contours. Therefore, when we speak of the charism, we refer to the relationships between the Brothers and the daily practices of community life as well as of the way of living the specific mission of the congregation. We speak of the expression of community prayer as well as of the accents of a spirituality, all of this expressed through a set of rules that do not give an abstract definition, but describe an evangelical lifestyle.

⁴ Cf. Études mennaisiennes n° 5 of Brother Paul Cueff : « L'institut des Frères de l'Instruction chrétienne de Ploërmel, les origines » (1816-1820). Brother Albert Côté has equally studied this period in his work entitled : « Nos fondateurs, une recherche sur leur lien de 1816 à 1841 » (Archives FIC La Prairie, 2009)

2- The Importance of the Bond of Obedience

Let us now pause on the question of how this decision has conditioned the beginning of our Congregation and helped define its current configuration.

a. The Project of the Founders

What did John Mary de la Mennais and Gabriel Deshayes wish for when signing the Union Treaty of June 6, 1819? The answer is in the text itself: "To provide children of the people, especially those in rural Brittany, solidly pious masters ..." It appeared to them that the vow of obedience alone gave enough guarantees and sufficed to constitute the "body" of zealous and fervent young people. The goal seemed thus attained: to organise a community of men attached to God alone, bound together by an entire submission to the will of their founders and superiors.

So, these Brothers were at the disposal of their "good father" to go wherever he decided to send them. They would discern the will of God for each of them as well as for the body they constituted. This disposition was required of them in the name of Lord. It was a fundamental element of the founding intuition that gave birth to our Institute. The urgency of the mission required this availability without fail. John Mary de la Mennais will not hesitate later on to invite the Brothers to go overseas, in foreign lands, to respond to what he perceived as a call of the Spirit through the signs of the times. Relying primarily on volunteers among whom he himself chose those he would send, he then decided that all should be available for such a departure from the moment of their joining the Institute. He thus demanded from his Broth-

ers the total sacrifice of their lives and the submission of their own will to the will of the superior who, in the light of faith, expressed the will of God. John Mary fondly relied on their generosity. He was amazed to see his sons go forth so generously, and he accompanied them with his advice and his paternal solicitude.

The importance given to the vow of obedience diminished in no way the requirements of poverty or the commitment to celibacy. In fact the Brothers were living the three vows expressed through one. Speaking of the first retreat in Auray in 1820, Brother Augustine wrote: "*Although the Brothers in this retreat pronounced but the vow of obedience, they were divested of what money they had, to which nobody found fault.*"⁵ The Brothers had to live an authentic religious life, without compromise, and strive to follow Christ by sharing the total offering of their life: "*You continue to fight valiantly for the sacred cause of Christ, walking in his footsteps through the practice of perfect obedience and complete detachment from all earthly things, practicing this generous virtue of poverty such as the divine Master embraced during his mortal life.*"⁶ The fact of not having taken a vow of poverty gave more flexibility in the implementation of a fully devoted life to the work of education. We see, for example, the case of Brothers placing their personal assets at the service of a school. The sole bond of obedience to the superior then assured a Brother of the merits of such a practice in the context of a real life of poverty.

⁵ Cf. Études mennaisiennes, n° 5, p. 64 ff.

⁶ Jean-Marie de la Mennais – S VII 5374

The sole vow of obedience clearly manifested the desire of the founder to create a "body" of "solidly pious masters" for the mission of education which, in his eyes, was an absolute urgency. Obey the Rule and obey superiors was the avenue that Father de la Mennais offered his Brothers. He urged them to "*be holy while making saints*", that is to say, to educate children and young people so that, through their lives, they would draw them to Christ. He wanted men fully available who witnessed, not to themselves, but to Christ. He wanted to instill in them the conviction that they did not do theirs, but the Lord's work,

A Brother was but a humble servant of the Lord with the children. No matter whether he be sent there or elsewhere, no matter whether he did this task or another. What mattered to him was to participate in God's work. To face this demanding mission, John Mary wanted the Brothers to possess true inner freedom. He was keen that their only joy be that of seeking only what God wanted. He believed that only those men entirely devoted to the education of children, and therefore to God alone, could meet the urgent need to establish truly Christian schools, the foundation of a renewed society through the Spirit of Christ. Such was the project of John Mary de la Mennais when he, with Gabriel Deshayes, had the intuition of this new foundation.

b. The Central Character of Religious Obedience

A major consequence of the single vow of obedience has been to establish between the Brothers and their founder a fundamental filial bond. For these generous young men, he was the father to whom they could open their heart in full

confidence, on whom they could rely fully and who represented Providence in whose hands they could fully rest.

The conviction that they did the will of God was strong when they obeyed their founder and superior. No doubt whatsoever could undermine their zeal. For them, one thing was certain: God wanted them to be where their superior sent them. To fulfil their vocation, they had only to conform to the will of their "good father" whose will, to them, was the will of God. The many letters they received from him give eloquent testimony to this. Through them, John Mary de la Mennais kept inviting them to complete self-abnegation so as to live in peace and true freedom. *"Abandoning yourself without reserve to your superiors, you are always sure to do the will of God and to be in the order of his Providence: what more do you want? My poor child, what peace, what happiness you would enjoy if you had no other feelings than those! May God grant them to you..."* he wrote, for example, to Brother Ambrose in 1831.

Father de la Mennais expected of them radical and absolute obedience. He did not want slavish obedience. He wanted adult obedience from a whole, undivided, and peaceful heart. He saw to it that each Brother was truthful in his adherence to the will of God. He warned them against fronting arrangements which hid a disgruntled and dissatisfied heart. *"He who obeys outwardly, but does not submit his innermost will, whispering in secret against his director, and does not submit his judgment to the judgment of the superior, is not a true religious,"* he saw fit to write to the Brothers of the West Indies.

Regarding the Rule, Father de la Mennais also requested

an obedience without fail. He notes in the 1825 edition: *"Look at the Rule as an expression of the will of God and its strict observation as the surest way to please him and sanctify yourself."* It is therefore not sufficient to correspond to the Rule in a purely external way. For the Founder, the Rule is not a list of things to do, but the expression of a life steeped in the Gospel. It will take all his know-how to keep the generosity and fervor of the Brothers on track so that true obedience liberates and opens their heart and intelligence. His letters show us how the fight is relentless and how it is not easy to be fully detached from oneself. We can benefit greatly from reading excerpts from letters sent by John Mary de la Mennais to the Brothers. They can help us to respond to our own vocation today. They invite us to "obey" our Rule of Life with the same spirit as our first Brothers:

"Try to cure Brother Jean-Marie from his presumption...; tell him religious obedience consists in submitting his mind more than his actions...;

You are not just required to practice obedience of action, but obedience of the mind and of the heart...;

Do not worry about project changes, you will be nowhere as safe as where obedience places you...;

Remember that your superior is your father ...;

All the trouble you are experiencing is caused by failing to do the will of God and that of the superiors he has given you;

A superior is still entitled to respect and not only to external obedience but to obedience of the spirit even if we still notice defects or errors in him, because it is not to a man that one obeys but to God...;

Be humble, obedient, patient, and you will have peace, you

will be blessed by God...;

Whether here or there, alone or with other brothers, nothing should bother you, provided you are where God wants you to be. Only obedience can teach you that...;

Go from day to day without too much forethought, and without ever wanting anything other than what God wants by doing what your superiors tell you ...;

I recommend that you apply yourself more than ever to the usual practice of the two principal virtues of your state: obedience and humility...⁷"

Thus, whether in his school or working with colleagues, each of the first Brothers, in the exercise of his mission was fundamentally linked to his superior, and through him to other Brothers. He could never consider himself the owner of his mission, of his school. He was always "sent" by another and with others. He was always "on mission". In this mission entrusted to him by the Lord, he was called to develop his talents and be creative. But he was always accountable to the one who sent him. He was never "self-employed"! He was thus prompted to leave the narrowness of the "I" to conform to the views of "another".

The vow of obedience shapes a community's wholeness where all complement what others cannot do. It is the whole body that is missionary and develops the full potential of the charism. Lived in a spirit of faith, of charity, of poverty and of humility, this vow opens us up to the generous and whole offering of ourselves to form a united "body" at the service of

⁷ Extracts from the letters of Father de la Mennais to his Brothers, from « *Le Père de la Mennais m'interpelle* », p. 14, 57-60.

the charism of the Institute. Each brings to the body his own talents for the mission; all are welcomed with gifts that are their own; all are willing to bring their own contribution according to the will of God expressed by the superior. "*But as it is, God placed the parts, each one of them, in the body as he intended*" (1 Cor 12: 18). We can say: "*Yes, obedience is better than sacrifice*" (1 Wis 15, 22).

On Mission to Serve

"Thanks to obedience we have the certitude of serving the Lord, of being "servants of the Lord" in our acting and suffering. Such certitude is the source of unconditional commitment, tenacious faithfulness, interior serenity, disinterested service and dedication of our best energies. "Those who obey have the guarantee of truly taking part in the mission, of following the Lord and not pursuing their own desires or wishes. In this way we can know that we are guided by the Spirit of the Lord, and sustained, even in the midst of great hardships, by his steadfast hand." (St Ignatius of Loyola)

The Service of Authority and of Obedience, n° 24

The Constitutions

"The Constitutions cannot remain an external text to be observed, they must become a living reality, written in the heart of the religious, so that he can live them as an expression and a fulfillment of oneself."

Arnaldo Pigna, *Repartir du Christ, Introduction à la spiritualité des vœux*, EDB, p. 223

OBEDIENCE, WAY OF THE CHARISM

*“Obedience is part of the New Covenant, which has obedience for its distinctive characteristic.”*⁸ For it is listening to the saving Word! *“I will put my laws in their minds and I will write them upon their hearts. I will be their God and they shall be my people.”* (He 8, 10) God renders us capable to hear his Word and to adhere to it with a willing and free “yes”. He calls us to be sons who accept his teachings. And if we listen to him to the extent of sharing his views, we will then give him the only reply he expects from us: *“Behold, I come to do your will, O God.”* (He 10,7)

To borrow a phrase of Pope Francis⁹ we can say that, not only are we a mission on this earth, but we are a “yes” to God, and therefore we are obedient to the Father, as Jesus sought to do the will of his Father in everything. His food was to do the Father's will. Obedience is thus the distinctive fea-

⁸ *The Service of Authority and of Obedience*, n° 6

⁹ Exhortation « *The Joy of the Gospel* », n° 273

ture of the new covenant; it makes us enter into the mystery of the Lord, our Master. Our life as a Brother is to live the obedience of the Son. *"The Lord Jesus makes us understand with his own form of life that mission and obedience cannot be separated."*¹⁰

Can we not say, therefore, that obedience is the *"distinctive characteristic"* of our vocation as Brothers? I think so under two aspects: that of the mission for which our Institute was born, and that of the community and of our brotherly relations.

1- Obedience and Mission

Father de la Mennais and Father Deshayes had in mind nothing but the fruitfulness of the work that God inspired them. They lived this apostolic experience with the intention of conforming to God's plan and of accomplishing his work. Both were imbued with God's very desire to welcome small children and lovingly educate them. They then asked Brothers to join this project and to consecrate their whole life to it. The obedience that they asked of the Brothers allowed them not only to establish schools where they were expected, but also to staff them with *"solidly pious masters."* So they did not first seek to establish an organized and structured body. Rather, they had in mind the urgency of the mission. They wanted for each of their humble Brothers to be *"as another Savior for the children, a man consecrated by vow to the education of children, a man who would be welcomed with the words: Blessed is he who comes in name of the Lord."*¹¹ Indeed, sent by their

¹⁰ *The Service of Authority and of Obedience*, n° 23

¹¹ S VII 2327

founders, these Brothers, not alone but with others, became messengers of Good News. They were sure of one thing: *"I am not here for myself; I have been sent, I'm here because the Lord wishes it in his mercy for the poor children. Through the vow of obedience, my words and deeds are the words and deeds of Jesus who loves them."*

The Brother who is thus sent lives his vocation with joy and enthusiasm in the truth of his heart and intelligence, without trying to take back with one hand what he gave up with the other. He is faithful to this call and is wholly committed to his creative abilities to give the bread of Christian instruction to those who are hungry. This is when the charism is alive.

On the contrary, he who first seeks to satisfy his whims, looking for a career plan, gradually sinks into individualism and isolates himself from his Brothers. He is no longer at the service of the charism; he turns everything to his advantage. The peace of the Holy Spirit no longer dwells in him and his heart is in darkness. Disobedience of the heart weakens the charism as it distends the fraternal bonds.

One thing is certain: obedience is a distinctive feature of our charism. Through it, we are "sons sent", "missionary disciples" in the spirit of the founder. When we adopt a real attitude of religious obedience, the charism of the Institute is alive, fruits are numerous, peace adorns fraternal relations and the community radiates openness and joy. Those with whom we live this mission feel it. We are for them Brothers who show the way to the truth of Christ living in this world. As we share our life with them at the heart of Mennaisian family, they feel closer to God and Christ. The way of the mis-

sion is that of the joyful and unambiguous obedience to the Rule of Life that the Spirit has given us.

Recently, a Brother told me his satisfaction to be teaching in a school close to his community. He showed me all the merit of his action, how he thought it was fully part of the dynamics of the charism of the congregation. He attempted to be very persuasive because in reality, while living with the Brothers of the community, he was not teaching in a Mennaisian school and his superior had not sent him there. He therefore needed to try to justify what was not justifiable. Clearly, his heart was divided. We are not Mennaisians by ourselves. We are by way of obedience, where the superior has sent us, and in communion with the other Brothers. This mission is not ours. We are part of it by the grace of a true and sincere obedience. It is entrusted to us by God through our superiors.

To another Brother, I once said: *"Do what your superior asks of you, and you can then tell that you are faithful to the charism."* Today I would add: *"You do not live the charism if you do not take your Brothers into account. You live by the charism if you say yes to your superior, and through him, to your brothers. To pretend, on the contrary, that your action is Mennaisian, while not doing what your superior asks you to do, is to live an illusion and deceive those who work with you. Do not forget that it is never your mission; it is that of the Father. Do like Christ who did not do what pleased him, but what pleased his Father."*

Of course, there is much good to do in the world. We, the Brothers, are sent among the children as witnesses of God's mercy. It's the good that we have to do. Others are called to

be the presence and action of Christ in other mission fields. The Holy Spirit organizes the ecclesial body and gives everyone the gifts they need to serve in the mission entrusted to them. That is why we have made a vow of obedience and that we offer our persons so that the charism of the Institute is deployed by the power of the Spirit. For this we are ready to go wherever the superior sends us with other Brothers and Laypeople. Our life will then bear all the fruit that the Lord expects. But what is most important is that this fecundity is not related to one Brother or another, but to the body that we make up. Thanks to the vow of obedience, it is the community that is fruitful.

The superiors themselves must have this vision of the charism of the Congregation. They must focus on works which manifest the fruits of Mennaisian charism, not the individual commitment of Brothers in endeavours that are not dependent on the Congregation. The Mennaisian charism is fruitful in activities animated by communities of Brothers and of Laypeople. This is fundamental. The legitimate search for paid work should not be at the expense of the fertility of the charism. It would be a mistake. In seeking to listen to the Spirit and to discern the mission field where each Brother, given his own talents, provides the best service, superiors seek to establish missionary communities inserted into Mennaisian projects. For this reason, they spend most of their time among their Brothers. They listen to them to get to know their talents. They also seek to know each of the undertakings of the Province or District. The superior who wants to fulfill his mission should meet his Brothers and Laypeople in a spirit of listening and of prayer, with the intention of "discerning"

what God is doing at the heart of everyone, and with the desire to build truly missionary communities.

Whoever is given the service of authority at the Provincial or District level is responsible for the animation of the communities, but he also has *"a coordinating function of the various skills for the mission, while respecting the roles and the internal norms of the Institute."*¹² For him, as for God, each Brother is a gift to the community. This allows the community to respond to the common mission. The Spirit who inspires the mission lives in the heart of each Brother and helps him build a real community at the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church. The fruits of joy and peace manifest the spiritual fruitfulness of this unity.

2- Obedience and the Community

As early as 1823, Father de la Mennais was developing the Rule taking into account successively relationships - the "links" - that each Brother should have with his superiors, with his own Brothers, with parents and with students themselves. Only then came the particular points of everyday living. Thus, the Rule that the Brothers vowed to follow with all their heart and with all their strength invited them to pay special attention to their relationships with others: humility and obedience of the heart and of the mind to the superior, spirit of peace and of charity in community, spirit of poverty and of self-denial in all their external relations, the spirit of respect and patience, gentleness and firmness with their students.

¹² Ibid n° 25

Thus, even if *"in these last few years, a renewed concept of anthropology has made the importance of the relational dimension of the human person much more evident,"*¹³ Father de la Mennais was already conscious of the necessity of coherence between what one says, on the one hand, and what one lives, on the other, and of what our relationships reveal *"to someone other than oneself."*¹⁴ It remains a fact today that relational anthropology is granted more importance in what we call *"spirituality of communion"*. Our vocation and mission are lived in the Church, in communion among us, but also in communion with other vocations. Thus, for example, we are more and more open to the Laypeople of the Mennaisian Family. Our religious consecration comes into its own at the heart of these relationships.

We no longer live the vow of obedience in the same context as our first Brothers. Today, probably more than yesterday, the communitarian dimension of our vows is expected to be enhanced: *"In today's cultural atmosphere, community holiness is a convincing witness, perhaps even more than that of the individual: this shows the perennial value of unity, a gift left by the Lord Jesus. This becomes particularly evident in international and intercultural communities that demand high levels of welcoming and dialogue."*¹⁵

If the focus was once placed on sending forth each Brother, today the emphasis must be on the mission of the community. This is why the recent General Chapters insist on writing and implementing in each community a *"community pro-*

¹³ The Service of Authority and of Obedience, n° 19

¹⁴ Ibid. n° 19

¹⁵ Ibid. n° 19

ject". There is no question of giving oneself one's own mission, but rather, to study how to implement, together, the mission received. Without this Community project, the community runs the risk of being a place of residence where everyone tries to defend his position and interests. The local superior should be very much aware of this and commit all of his energies to the community development of this Project. The major superior, for his part, should support the efforts of his Brothers, and demonstrate initiative and creativity.

The community is the way to holiness because it is the place of discernment of God's will. All the Brothers of the community find their unity in the risen Lord in the midst of them, and they seek to serve together, not just as the path of one, but still more as a journey that the whole community undertakes together. As our Rule of Life so well says: *"Enlightened by the insights and the reflections of its members, the community in which the Spirit speaks and acts is an ideal place for discerning God's will."* (C 31). At the heart of this discernment, the superior listens, discerns and decides. This may be why we say that the vow of obedience is the cement of the community. *"The search for the will of God and the willingness to carry it out is the spiritual cement that saves the group from the fragmentation that can arise from the great variety of persons in all their diversity when they are lacking a unifying principle."*¹⁶ This implies among the Brothers a *"same spirit of collaboration, in all humility, docility and charity"* (C 32). The dispersion and multiplication of tasks, activities and places of mission is an evil against which superiors must fight.

¹⁶ *The Service of Authority and of Obedience*, n° 18

On the contrary, they should promote all that unites the Brothers around a clearly identified mission.

The superior knows how to take the measure of his responsibility. His personal response to his mission depends to a large extent on the fertility of the community. This does not take away anything from the initiative of each one. It fosters it if it is lived in full transparency with the superior and with other Brothers. We shall never insist enough on the transparency of fraternal relations lived in the greatest respect for everyone and their responsibilities. If the superior is afraid to take the initiative, others will do it for him, and the unity of the body will suffer. *"This involves, on the part of authority, a patient coordination and, on the part of the consecrated person, a sincere openness to working together."*¹⁷ Obedience lived in freedom and joy, through real confidence in the one who is charged with the service of authority, greatly favors this desired unity.

*"The Spirit opens each one to the Reign of God, while maintaining his or her different gifts and roles. Obedience to the action of the Spirit unifies the community in its witness to his presence, makes the steps of all joyful, and becomes the basis of community life in which all obey, each with various tasks."*¹⁸

¹⁷ *The Service of Authority and of Obedience*, n° 25 a)

¹⁸ *Ibid.* n° 18

WILLINGLY / GLADLY

"This last word (willingly) decides everything, and that's what matters. Not reluctantly, not as a matter of obligation, not hesitantly but willingly. However, we must say this word with the heart, not only with the mind or just with the lips. I must say it with all my will. And always more deeply. You understand? It must ever more deeply penetrate the heart because there is still much reluctance and resistance in the heart. These must be removed with the word "willingly". Where there is still in us narrowness of mind and inertia, it must penetrate in all its glory as a clear and powerful light; ever deeper, ever more quickly so that everything is resplendent before God. "I will, Lord." So you will be happy.

Such was the spirit of Jesus. The spirit of Jesus was pure, joyful readiness: "May I always fulfill the will of the Father." And if you adopt the attitudes in keeping with that "willingly", work, duties, decisions, games, renunciations will come too. Believe it: you will have the joyful strength that will be ready for anything, unconditionally. God is right there. But this basic disposition must always be renewed, especially if it is difficult. If you run out of breath on your first attempt and something intervenes, repeat: "No matter! Willingly!", and get to work".

Romano Guardini, *Lettere sulla autoformazione* (Brescia), p 10-11

OBEDIENCE, WAY TO HOLINESS

1- Placing out Trust in Providence

"Impelled by the desire to live the baptismal consecration to its fullest extent, the Brother willingly surrenders to the divine plan and makes it his own, even when, at times, it entails sharing the anguish of the crucified Christ." (D 54) The Brother willingly surrenders to the divine plan and makes it his own! Here's how the Rule talks about the way a Brother is invited to surrender himself entirely to Providence. He finds his happiness in the will of God, not in himself, wasting his energies in the defence of his supposedly threatened interests. *"The vow of obedience introduces him intimately into that surge of love which led Christ to state, just before his Passion: 'The world must be brought to know that I love the Father and that I do exactly what the Father told me.'" (D 54)*

To have complete trust in Providence is to be introduced in the *"movement of love"* of the Father for the Son, at the heart of the Trinity. We cannot profess the vow of obedience with-

out a deep desire to diligently search for a true union with the will of God. It is a personal and free choice that corresponds to a deep attraction of the Spirit of God in the recesses of the heart, a radical choice that engages clear life decisions. It is not possible, then, to say, on the one hand, that we trust in Providence, and on the other, that we seek to build a personal career and amass secret possessions, etc.

The Brother who professes obedience no longer looks to satisfy his personal interests. Detached from material goods and from excessive self-seeking, his only desire is for God and his Kingdom. He knows that *"worldly"* satisfactions are worthless before God, and he finds happiness in accomplishing God's will for him. What joy it is to meet a Brother who does not offer the slightest hesitation to a proposed change of community or of mission, even if this request is demanding. Such surrender and availability are signs of proven faith and genuine humility: faith, because we recognize the will expressed by the superior as that of God himself, despite the poverty and the sinfulness of the superior; humility, because we are open to God's will and we do not wish to put ourselves forward with any claim whatsoever. In this surrender is the true joy, the true "food". *"In this most intimate communion with the paschal mystery of Christ, the Brother acquires, like him, an eternal greatness."* (D 61)

The Brother who tries to conform his life to the vow of obedience that he made in the generosity of his youth is sure to live *"in the order of Providence."* He is the beloved of the Lord who takes care of him. He shares with him his concern for the Kingdom. He prays for those whom the Lord loves and wants to save, the *"little ones"* and the poor whom his heart

cherishes. He wants to console, to evangelize, to heal, to liberate, in the manner of Jesus. He knows that only God can do so. He makes himself available, humbly, without relying on his own powers. *"Obedience is what unifies my life and structures my desire in a mission that challenges me and makes me grow. Obedience is a source of joy and peace. It tears me from the anguish of my subjectivity to establish me in the Body of Christ where I find my profound identity.... As such, we can understand that it has a central place in the spiritual life, at the heart of other mediations but with a special meaning because it involves my freedom and that is what defines me most deeply."*¹⁹

The Brother does whatever the Lord asks him to do, even if he were to waste away and jeopardise his health because he awaits consolations, reward and rest from God. The vow of obedience frees us from self-seeking and puts us in the order of the Providence of God who is all goodness and love, tenderness and joy. Recently the Pope evoked these questions with priests gathered around him on Holy Thursday. He spoke to them of the fatigue that pastors can encounter among their sheep. *"We cannot be pastors with sour faces, who complain or, what is worse, pastors who are bored. This debilitating fatigue spells self-deception. When not looked squarely in the face with the joyful serenity of one who discovers himself a sinner, that fatigue leads to "wanting and not wanting," risks everything and then regrets the onions of Egypt. I like to call this fatigue, simpering with spiritual worldliness. The word of the Apocalypse tells us the cause of this fatigue: "I have against you that you've given up your first love"(2: 3-4). Only*

¹⁹ Michel RONDET, s.j., Cahiers du Centre Sèvres, 1983, p. 79

love gives rest." He who does not live his vow of obedience in the dynamics of his "first love", wearies and is sad. He is afraid that the superior will ask him too great a sacrifice. He has no real confidence in the Providence of God who takes care of him as the father takes care of his child. In reality, he does not share the concern of God and of his Providence for his People. His love is insipid amidst compromises of all sorts.

Brothers, let us hold on fast to our hope and our love. The joy of the heart depends on one and only thing: our perfect inner communion with the love of God for his People. The Lord expects us to share his concern for the lost sheep. He wants us to share the love of his merciful heart. There is one way to do this: the perfect and loving obedience to His will expressed in the Rule of Life and in the will of our Brothers. Like Jesus, we will sometimes have to painfully but peacefully and lovingly say: *"Abba all things are possible: may this cup pass away from me; yet not my will but your will be done."* (Mk 14, 36).

2- Listening to the Word of God

The vow of obedience presupposes faith in a God whose will is far beyond us and unknown to us; it is the trustful listening of the son to the Father. This listening is that of Jesus which must gradually become ours. This is what we talk about when we say we want to do the will of God expressed in Christ. To make this view our own, we must rely on a strong experience of that inner Word that calls us and makes us come into existence, to which we have to say "yes", a "yes" which is the expression of Christ's: Here I am!

To go even further, in language that the world cannot understand, we must say that obedience to God is the only possible way for the intelligent and free being who is man to realize his full potential. When he disobeys God, when he says "no", man shuts himself away and withers. His undertakings are doomed to failure. Only the loving son can understand that language. Only someone who truly loves can understand the language of the cross which consists in obeying to the very end of love.

So we must learn to lovingly listen to the Word of God because this is where God renews his call every day. The Word inclines us to the obedience which frees and fulfills us, and opens us to creativity in peace and unity with the Brothers. To live as sons who have been sent, as loving sons, we have to listen and welcome the Word in the innermost recesses of our being. This assimilation of the words that come from God is both a sweet and strong experience. Every morning we have the opportunity to receive and listen to the Word that is Christ himself, to welcome the word of Jesus in our heart as well as in our intelligence and our memory: *"Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child, will not enter it."* (Mk 10, 15) We are invited to become that small child who listens. *"The loving encounter with the Word shows one how to discover the way to life and the way through which God wishes to free his children, nourishes one's spiritual instincts for the things which are pleasing to God, conveys the sense and the taste for his will, gives peace and joy for staying faithful..."*²⁰

²⁰ *The Service of Authority and of Obedience*, n° 7

In the silence of prayer and in the dialogue with God is felt the secret presence of the Unspeakable. Then may we grasp a little, with fear and trembling, how true the words of the prophet are. *"My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways, says the Lord. As the heaven are high above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts" (Is 55: 8-9).* From our heart, humbly, may swell the desire to know these paths, and especially to be faithful to them.

Listening to Jesus every day, contemplating him on the roads of Palestine, recognizing him in the brother who suffers, we learn from him to be sons. Listening to the Word every day is to experience a "letting go", to be taught and touched by the Savior. In the silence and peace of the heart, this Word shows the path, opens to the light, educates to the true meaning of discernment. It helps us not to want to control everything at any cost, but to let God be God in us so that he gradually transforms us into his likeness. For this, 30 minutes of our time every morning for the contemplative listening to the Word is the minimum that a religious should give. Some seek to do more because they know they need to listen more lengthily to be truly faithful.

When morning prayer is held in silence, sometimes even in aridity, the evening prayer will come as a vital necessity, not to fulfill an obligation, but to quench an inner thirst. Back before the Lord, we will again experience the silence that opens the door to the One who has accompanied us every moment of the day without, perhaps, our realizing it. To gaze upon him, to listen to him, to be with him is a necessity of love. *"Therefore, obedience is not humiliation but the truth on*

which the fullness of human persons is built and realized²¹” in the image of Christ who was obedient.

Listening to the Word makes us available to the action of the Spirit who gives strength and light to be obedient in faith. Jesus himself was led by the Spirit. It is the Spirit who can give us the same freedom that was in Christ, freedom to give up everything for love, freedom to decrease so that God's will, and not ours, be done, the freedom of daring to act when the inner conviction so requires, freedom to trust when obedience is more difficult and painful. In the peace that he gives, the Spirit then makes us feel that it is not to a man that we obey in the person of the superior, but to God, the Master of all.

3- Submitting One's Will to Human Mediations

“When they enter the Congregation, the Brothers accept to submit their wills to human intermediaries” (C 30) says the Rule of Life. What are these human intermediaries? The answer is given in the same number: “They find in the Rule of Life, rooted in the Gospel and approved by the Church, as well as in the authority of their superiors, authentic manifestations of God's will. In a spirit of faith, they recognize the presence of the Lord in the imperfect persons in authority.”

All the baptized are called to obey the Spirit of God speaking through the many human mediations, just as he communicates by internal motions that we must learn to decipher. Similarly, all the baptized are attentive to what the Spirit says through the Church, *“the sacrament of the risen Christ”*, which, at the same time, is made up of sinners. When Father de la Mennais invites us to love the Church, he uses

²¹ *The Service of Authority and of Obedience*, n° 8

the image of the love of a child for his mother: *"We must love the Church as we love Jesus Christ of whom she is the spouse and who makes with her but one body and one flesh ... We must love her with all our heart, keenly feel her pain, grieve her losses, rejoice in her victories ..."*²² Through her, we seek to come unto Christ, to listen and to follow him. *"Strictly speaking, the religious does not make the vow to obey to God. The vow of obedience to God is part of Baptism and every Christian should do the will of God always and in everything. When he is in Christ, he no longer belongs to himself for Christ becomes the sole master of his life."*²³

Submitting our will to the will of God necessarily involves the humble openness to human mediation. We are not angels! God uses our Brothers and the institutions to help us find him. The Congregation is one! It is made up, too, of sinful men! It is up to us to welcome them humbly, acknowledging ourselves sinners. We must keep to our place which is that of service, whatever our function or our mission, as sinners in need of the mercy of our Brothers. Thus do we trust our superiors, not because they are saints, but because they have received the ministry from the Church, to help their Brothers to discern and do the will of God. Formidable service that should entice them to have recourse to silent and humble prayer. Such a responsibility should also invite their Brothers to pray for them.

"The religious vow is intended to fulfill the basic requirement of baptism (to do the will of God). How? By using media-

²² S VIII 2497-2502

²³ Arnaldo Pigna, *Repertir du Christ, Introduction à la spiritualité des vœux*, EDB, p. 214

tions that facilitate the way. To get to obey God (which is the duty of all!), one undertakes to adopt special means and, in a special way, one makes a vow to submit to a man beyond the strict extent of the precept to help one and give one a guarantee in addition to adhering to the will of the Father. So we do not vow obedience to God, but we make the vow to submit to a man in order to obey God.²⁴"

Among the human mediations, the Rule of Life occupies the first place. A Brother decides to make the Rule his standard of conduct. For him, it translates the Gospel. He knows that nothing is insignificant in this Book of life which speaks to him of the Gospel. On the contrary, he takes care to live by the smallest things so as to be faithful in the most important ones. Small gestures of loyalty reflect a firm desire to love that is more than words up in the air. Father de la Mennais asked his Brothers an unfailing love of the Rule. *"Keep it, my dear children, keep it so that it may keep you"* (Brother Laurent, 1852). *"The Rule and the other indications concerning the way of life also become means of mediating the will of the Lord: human mediation but still authoritative, imperfect but binding at the same time, the starting point from which to begin each day but also for moving forward in a generous and creative impulse towards that sanctity which God "wills" for every consecrated person.²⁵"*

"By his vows, the Brother binds himself in a way which gives consistency to a community undertaking; he signs a contract. In complete freedom, he assumes all the obligations of the Rule of Life..." (D 25) This "contract" is the "human media-

²⁴ Ibid., p. 214

²⁵ The Service of Authority and of Obedience, n° 9

tion” which is the covenant between God and each of us, and with the body of the Congregation. The charismatic or *“evangelical project” of the Institute, recognised by the Church through her approval of the Rule of Life, is an authentic “path for seeking God and holiness”²⁶*.

However, religious obedience does not end with the Rule. It is supported by the Rule, but it blossoms into an openness of the heart and of the mind under the action of the Spirit. A religious adheres to the Lord of his life *“when sensing in some way his presence in human intermediaries, such as in the Rule, the superiors,”* but also *“in the community, the signs of the times, the expectations of others and, above all, the poor; when one has the courage to cast the nets on the “strength of his word” and not only from solely human motivations; when one chooses to obey not only God but also others.”²⁷* Far from being an infantile submission that would be a refuge, a Brother’s true obedience is like a fire burning deep in his heart that urges him always to want what God wants. His heart cannot be at rest until it has the conviction that his life is in accordance with what God wants for him. He becomes so attentive to human mediations that he feels *“something of the force with which Christ was drawn to His Cross--that baptism He had still to receive, by which that fire would be lighted which sets you too ablaze – something of that “foolishness” which St. Paul wishes we all had, because it alone makes us wise.”²⁸* Far from extinguishing the inner fire, the conformity of our lives to the Rule of Life and obedience to what the superiors

²⁶ Ibid., n 9

²⁷ Ibid., 11

²⁸ Evangelica Testificatio, n° 29, 1971, Paul VI

require manifest the will to correspond to the divine will, through love, through a life entirely offered. So the joy of heart is a sign, in us, that we are willing to let the Holy Spirit act. *“Is there not a mysterious relationship between renunciation and joy, between sacrifice and magnanimity, between discipline and spiritual freedom?”*²⁹ asked the Pope.

4- Discerning Together the Will of God

Our discourse on religious obedience justifies neither authoritarianism nor infantile obedience. These two notions are totally foreign to our conception of this vow. *“This obedience, far from diminishing human dignity, leads the religious to maturity, enhancing his freedom as child of God.”* (D 57) Of course, the freedom the Rule speaks of is not to be confused with the claim of autonomy of the person vis-à-vis God or others. Whoever seeks to be free from all bonds falls back into slavery. Like God's people out of Egypt, the community should rather be guided by the cloud, bright and obscure, of the Spirit of God. It will then be free from the bonds that may impede its progress.

The community aims to be the place where the work of the Spirit of God can be discerned, the place where the cloud of the Spirit wraps the community in its light, where sharing of the word belongs to all, where the least of the Brothers is invited to put his talents at the service of all. Instead of barricading ourselves behind the "walls" of our certainties, we

²⁹ Evangelica Testificatio, n° 29

must seek to build bridges of dialogue and fraternal openness over our differences in charity and forgiveness.

"The walls that divide us may be overcome only if we are willing to listen to and learn from each other. We need to resolve differences through forms of dialogue that will allow us to grow in understanding and respect. The culture of coming together requires that we be willing not only to give but also to receive from others... To dialogue means that we are convinced that the other has something good to say ... To dialogue does not mean giving up one's own ideas and traditions but not to consider them as unique and absolute."³⁰

The superior is not the only one to seek the will of God; he does so with the whole community. If the superior is the one who decides ultimately, the discernment of God's will is the work of the community. No one is excluded from this quest. *"Together with his Brothers, the superior, keeping in mind differences in age, formation and mentality, tries to discern the will of God in persons and events."* (D 60) It is not easy, because the search for the will of God can only be realized in a heart that is free from all attachment. But who can say that he is really detached from everything to the point of wishing nothing but the service of God in holiness and justice (cf. Lk 1: 74-75)? Through prayer, gradually, the Lord can free us from the ties that hold us back and prevent us from moving forward.

If there is one point on which we need to move forward, it is, I believe, that of our ability to discern together the will of God, as part of the mission received by the community from

³⁰ Pope Francis on the day of International Social Communications, 2014

the Provincial or the Visitor. Of course there are different opportunities to practice communal discernment, but here I wish to spend some time on the writing of the Community Project which has already been discussed above. When the community builds its "Community Project" at the beginning of the year, and then evaluates it later on, it involves its capacity for discernment. But in reality, spiritual discernment is a matter of living together daily as Brothers. It is a process that starts in the morning as we come together in prayer. In faith, we know that it is the Spirit of Jesus who brings us together and prays in us; he creates the community. This proceeds all day long as we decide to put ourselves at the service of our Brothers and shun isolation. It is an attitude of the heart that penetrates our life, whether in times of relaxation, at meal time, or at the heart of our work and of educational activities.

To experience the joy of being together, we should not make room for inner voices that judge and dissent. Exercising control over our thoughts is a sign that we are trying to listen to the Holy Spirit. God manifests his presence where charity rules and people listen to each other. A heart that is open is one that tries to comfort, not to judge. Such a heart is therefore attentive to the "breeze" of the Spirit who speaks in everyone amidst the various occupations of each day.

It is the attitude of the "watchman" who is in peace and enjoys the presence of God. Such is the interior disposition that makes it possible to build together a real mission project and a community life.

Here are some tips that can help undertake together this Community discernment and lead to the writing of such a Project.

- Pray together the Spirit to enlighten us. If we truly seek God's will for us, we must signify it by our spirit of listening to the Word and to the inspirations of the Spirit. We will ask him to help us not to let ourselves be carried away by the purely human logic of profit, success and recognition.
- Listen to others with sympathy, without reacting immediately. Allow them to express themselves fully, making an attempt to understand them, showing appreciation for their opinion, for we know that the Spirit also speaks through them. We do not react until we have truly listened, and when we have listened, we intervene to express out thoughts and not to comment on what has just been shared.
- We express ourselves truthfully without making our opinion an absolute, thus admitting not having the whole answer to the question. We share an opinion and leave it at that. We decline from insisting excessively on our own ideas and we show willingness to adopt another point of view.
- Finally, we commit to the position that has been decided jointly, in agreement with the superior, accepting that the orientations agreed to are not necessarily our own. This assumes enough inner freedom not to give in to irritation, and to trust the judgment of the Brothers and the superior's decision.

5- It is to the Lord that we Obey

Saint Ignatius of Loyola said: *"True obedience does not look to whom it is rendered, but because of whom it is offered, and if it is offered because of our only Creator and Lord, it is he, the Lord of all, who is obeyed."*³¹ This means that one obeys God by obeying the superior who does not take the place of God, but who represents him.

"In consecrated life, the role of Superiors, including local Superiors, has always been of great importance for the spiritual life and for mission... Those who exercise authority cannot renounce their obligation as those first responsible for the community, as guides of their brothers and sisters in the spiritual and apostolic life... The role that the authority plays must be reaffirmed as essential for strengthening fraternal communion and in order not to render vain the obedience professed. While authority must be above all fraternal and spiritual, and while those entrusted with it must know how to involve their brothers and sisters in the decision-making process, it should still be remembered that the final word belongs to authority and, consequently, that authority has the right to see that decisions taken are respected." (VC 43)

Authority in the Church is always a reflection of that of Christ. *"I have come from my Father and you refuse to receive me but if someone else comes in his own power, you receive him!"* (Jn 5, 45). *"The people who heard him were impressed by his teaching, for he was not like the teachers of the law, but he gave them his teaching with authority"* (Mk 1, 22). The authority is given by the Father. The mission of the superior is

³¹ Constitutions of the Company of Jesus, 84

a service of communion of communities and of individuals for the mission. The superior is most happy when living his mission as a humble service that he has not given himself, but that he received for a time and endeavors to fill with joy and in truth. He knows that every service of authority entails a temptation of power, but he also knows that the best way to fight this temptation is to perform his mission without fear and with great confidence in his Brothers. *"Your ministry must always be a ministry of kindness and of charity; nothing is gained by harshness; one becomes despicable and loses the merit of one's work,"* said John Mary de la Mennais Brother Arthur Greffier.

The person in authority does not replace Christ but represents him. The Brother superior knows that he is not infallible and that he needs the assistance and insights of his Brothers. He is at the service of the mission received by the community, but he alone does not have the responsibility on behalf of all. He himself lives by obedience. He listens to the Spirit and it is with his Brothers that he seeks to do the will of God. In fact, through the one who received the mission of superior, it is Christ who exercises authority. Any authority in the Church participates in the service that Christ himself received from the Father. It must be lived as Christ lived it, that is to say, by putting on the apron and washing the feet of one's Brothers (see D 153). The superior relies on the strength of the Spirit when he has to make decisions after having prayed and discerned, and sought useful and necessary advice.

The exercise of authority implies both obedience and service. Superiors as well as Brothers, all pledge obedience to the Lord. It is therefore an important aspect of the mission of

the Superior to encourage discernment in his Brothers, to listen to the signs of the Spirit, and then listen to how they perceive the signs of the times and the calls of God for this world. Through the mission entrusted to him by the Church, the superior is thus a "teacher" for his Brothers, by his life even more than by his words. He invites them to follow Christ and to do what he asks of them, not on their own but in community. He speaks to them of Christ and with them tries to listen to what Christ tells them. That's why he gives himself time to listen to the calls of the times, to carry on his formation and to pray. He often prays for his Brothers and he relies on their own prayer.

Benedict XVI told new bishops: *"The bishop must be a person who prays, who intercedes for men with God. The more he does, the more he also understands the people entrusted to him and can become for them an angel, a messenger of God."* I believe this can also be said of Brothers Superior who have received the charge of authority and who are "good shepherds" for their Brothers. Since the superior is called to be a sure guide, he must also learn to walk in the footsteps of the Lord. As for Pope Francis, he recently reminded the Cardinals: *"Walk. "House of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord " (Isaiah 2: 5) This is the first thing God said to Abraham: Walk before me and be blameless. Walk: Our life is a walk and when we stop, nothing else goes. Walk always, in the presence of the Lord, in the light of the Lord, trying to live with this irreproachability that God asked Abraham in his promise."*

More than any other, the Superior, whose mission is to signify that we want to obey God alone, is called to *"saint-*

hood through making saints." He evangelizes his Brothers by letting himself be evangelized by them.

Madeleine DELBRÊL

The Dance of Obedience

“We played the flute but you did not dance.”

...There are many saints who needed to dance,
They were so happy to live:
Saint Teresa with her castanets,
Saint John of the Cross with a Christ Child in his arms,
And Saint Francis, before the pope.
If we were happy with you, Lord,
We could not resist
To that need to dance that is sweeping the world,
And we would come to guess
What dance it pleases you to make us dance
By dancing in the footsteps of your Providence.

Because I think you may have enough
People who always attempt to serve you
Solemn tunes...

One day you felt like having a little something else,
You invented St. Francis,
And you made him your juggler.
It's up to us to let us invent
So as to be joyful people dancing their life with you.

To be a good dancer, with you as elsewhere, we must not
Know where it leads.
We must follow,
Be cheerful,
Be lightweight,
And especially not be stiff.
Do not ask for explanations
About the steps you are pleased to do.
It should be like an agile and living,
Extension of you

And receive through you the rhythm of the orchestra.
Do not want to move at all costs:
Accept to turn, to move sideways.
We must learn to stop and slide instead of walking.
And this would be but foolish steps
Without music harmonizing everything.

But we forget the music of your mind,
And we turn our life into gymnastic exercise;
We forget that in your arms, it dances,
That your Holy Will
Is an inconceivable fantasy...

Lord, come and invite us...

We are ready to dance for you the dance of work,
The dance of heat, later on the dance of cold.
While some tunes are often in minor, we will not tell you
That they are sad;
If others leave us out of breath, we will not tell you
That they leave us hoarse.
And if people jostle us, we will take it laughing,
Knowing that this always happens while dancing.

Lord, teach us instead
What place, in this eternal romance
Started between us and you,
Holds this very particular dance of obedience.

...In the serenity of what you want.
...Let us live our lives,
Not like a chess game where everything is calculated...
Not as a theorem that breaks our heads,
But like an endless party where your meeting is renewed
...Like a dance,
Between the arms of your grace,
In the universal music of love.

Lord, come and invite us.

CONCLUSION

MARY, Model of Obedience to the Spirit

"Yes, obedience is better than sacrifice" (1 Wis 15, 22). The vow of obedience makes us experience the "Joy of the Gospel." God calls us to a joyful and free obedience. This is what Madeleine Delbr  l emphasizes, in her own way, in the poem "The Ball of Obedience" which we read in the preceding pages³². She invites us to dance: "Let us live our lives ... like an endless party where your meeting is renewed ... like a dance ... " Jesus himself invites us to the joy of obedience that is expressed in the love of the Brothers, "You are my friends if you do what I command you ... This is what I command you: that you love each other ... (Jn 15, 13; 17) ... and your joy no one will take it away from you" (Jn 16, 23).

³² Cf. p.

The whole life of Mary is placed under the sign of joyful obedience to the Holy Spirit. This begins at the Annunciation. Surprised, she offers no resistance to the announcement of the angel Gabriel. Hers is a fully open heart at what she feels to be the expression of the will of God. After hearing the angel express God's plan: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you ..."* (Lk 1: 35), she has but one answer: *"I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word!"* (Lk 1: 38). She does not care about her reputation or criticism that could befall her. Her heart is right; her choice is clear. Her only desire – she intuitively knew by maintaining an inner docility to the Spirit – is to say "yes" to God in everything. And when she does not understand, as when her child remains in Jerusalem unbeknown to his parents for *"being in the house of his Father"*, she *"faithfully keeps all these things in her heart"* (Lk 2: 48-51).

Mary is a model for every Christian. If we listen to her and share with her our daily life in prayer and trust, we will learn from her to let ourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit, and He will say "yes" in us. Yes to the will of God discerned with our Brothers in a fraternal life full of attention to others in joy and prayer. Yes to the will of God expressed by our superiors.

Thanks to the Holy Spirit who was able to abide in her, Mary was completely obedient and compliant to God's will. She never chose self-satisfaction at the expense of others. Her choice was ever clear: it was "yes" to the Spirit's promptings. The "yes" of the Spirit gushed forth into her on all occasions. It was therefore the joy of the Spirit that dwelt permanently into her, even in suffering and tribulations.

At Cana, Mary also gives us a lesson on authority. Throughout the New Testament, the only instruction that Mary gives is this: "*Do whatever he tells you*" (Jn 2: 5). Mary's "authority" is expressed through her gentleness, thoughtfulness and the clarity of her discernment. Her word admits no opposition; it is a gentle but strong invitation to do what Jesus asks. It is a call to obey the Lord. She is the breath of the Spirit who speaks the fruitful Word of Jesus. This is the mystery of the fundamental union of Mary and Jesus in the Holy Spirit. May we understand what is at stake here. May we not oppose the refusal of laziness, of selfishness or of pride to the Love that brings life in abundance. The answer of the servants to an order that may seem absurd – the filling the jars with water while it is wine that is needed – this response leads to abundant fecundity. Obedience may sometimes seem obscure but it is always crowned with good fruits. All the saints can testify to this. If we listen to Mary who speaks to us in secret, if we love her like a mother whom we pray to every day, we will welcome the service of authority as a wonderful grace of fraternal charity.

At Pentecost, Mary is with the apostles whom she has prepared to receive the Holy Spirit. Where the Church is, there is Mary. Where Mary is, there is the Holy Spirit. Mary teaches the Church docility to the Holy Spirit. She teaches us every day on this humble and engaging life's journey, listening to his word, doing what the Lord asks us to do through fidelity to our Constitutions and the proposals of our superiors.

So must we, with John, welcome Mary into our home. With him, we become children of Mary. She will give us the grace of letting go in the hands of Providence. She will help us

say "yes" when obedience becomes more difficult to understand and to put into practice. If we live close to Mary, we will have the strength to accompany her to the cross with the apostle John. Conversely, if we claim with Peter! "Even if all abandon you, I will not abandon you," we may fall and say no when trials come.

Mary wants to teach us joyful obedience in daily life, in big and small things, obedience of the heart and of the intelligence that always says "yes" or "willingly" like Romano Guardini invites us to do (cf. . p.). Her help is powerful. She gives us great strength to be zealous and ardent missionaries. We have to open our heart to her so that she may fashion it in the image of her Son. We know the intuition that saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort expressed in the "Treatise of True Devotion" and in which he proposes to those who want to imitate Christ to dedicate their lives to his Mother. For him, obedience to Mary is the surest way to "do what Jesus asks us" in cheerful and complete obedience.

May we therefore speak to Mary with a filial heart, abandoning ourselves into her hands. Our heavenly Mother will put herself at our service, she will watch over us and we will make great strides in joyful docility to God's will.

***"With the entire heavenly court as my witness,
I choose you this day for my Mother and my Queen.
I deliver and consecrate myself to you,
my body and soul,
myself, both interior and exterior,
and the worth of my good actions,
past, present and future;***

***leaving to you the total right of disposing of me,
and all that belongs to me,
according to your wish,
for the greater glory of God
in time and in eternity. Amen."***

Brother Yannick Houssay, S. G.

September 8, 2015

On the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary
and the anniversary of the birth of Jean Mary de la Mennais