



# **In a Mennaisian Family Mode**

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**BROTHERS OF CHRISTIAN INSTRUCTION**

**April 2021**

**Circular 317**



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# INTRODUCTION

*"In a Mennaisian Family Mode"*<sup>1</sup> is the title of this circular letter. Better still, it is the commitment that the General Chapter of 2018 recommends to each Brother and to each community. What does this mean exactly? Are not the Lay people just as concerned? In fact, a clarification is in order. This expression "*in in a Mennaisian Family Mode*", specified as such both in the French and Spanish Versions, comes at the end of a paragraph in which the Capitulants say that they welcome with gratitude the proposals made by the Lay people who participated in the last General Chapter. So, everything lights up! "*In a Mennaisian Family Mode*" now designates the new lifestyle which should help Lay people and Brothers to move forward together.

This circular letter, "*In a Mennaisian Family Mode*", has only one simple objective: to encourage people to live this orientation of the General Chapter as a call from God for each Lay person and each Brother, here and now. If, at the end of this journey, everyone wonders about what concrete commitment to make, wherever they are, and takes a first step or goes a little further, my goal will have been achieved. This is the New Page that the

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Note about the title of this Circular and on any subsequent use of the expression in the text:

<sup>1</sup> This expression is used to refer to the specific mode of life or lifestyle. Therefore, "*In a Mennaisian Family Mode*" simply means "*In the Mennaisian Family way of Life*".

Lord invites us to write on the fellowship parchment of our days, on the lines of communion and collaboration and using the ink of benevolence, compassion and dedication.

This circular is addressed to the Lay people and to the Brothers of the Mennaisian Family. Isn't this a great opportunity to delve deeper together into some elements of our charism? Drinking from this source guarantees us greater fidelity to the gift that the Holy Spirit offered free of charge to our Congregation. It is the rock on which we must build our common home if we want it to withstand the various storms that will befall it sooner or later.

*"In a Mennaisian Family Mode"* has three chapters. The first one, **returning to the wellspring**, plunges us into the heart of our spirituality by making us contemplate the humble, obedient and servant Christ (Phil 2: 5-11). The second chapter, **reaching out to others**, urges us to place fraternity at the service of the life of children and young people (Mk 10: 13-16). The last chapter invites us to the missionary conversion which prompts us to **dare go to the peripheries** to serve the poor, those who are far away (Mk 6: 34-44).

I sincerely want this circular letter to help each Lay person and each Mennaisian group, each Brother and each community, *to think and live more and more 'in a Mennaisian Family Mode* (CG 2018, n° 16). To do this, the letter can be studied either personally or in a group or in community. It does not provide ready-made answers but invites us to seek them together, in synodal mode. It provides possible content for meetings of Mennaisian groups or fraternities.

May the Holy Spirit help each and everyone to find in this circular letter what he or she needs to grow and *live more and more 'in a Mennaisian Family Mode'* (GC 2018, n° 16)!

# CHAPTER I

## RETURNING TO THE WELLSPRING

Why return to the Wellspring? This is where life-giving water is found. Those who have experienced walking in the tropical midday sun know the importance of finding a waterhole. It is good to live there. It is a cool and attractive place. Life flourishes there in all its beauty and splendor. The foliage of the trees is very green. The birds sing. Everything is joy and celebration.

Did not the Samaritan woman going to the well encounter the Living Water (Jn 4: 6-14)? Was she not invited to welcome the water, better still, the Living Water? There, water is no longer something but someone: Jesus. "*Whoever drinks the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again*" (Jn 4: 14).

The Living Water that Jesus offers us today is inexhaustible, eternally fresh because it flows from his pierced side on the cross (Jn 19: 34). It "*cleanses everything it enters, and life appears wherever the torrent flows*" (Ez 47: 9). In this sense, it is a constant source of fertility, fidelity, dynamism, newness and youth for all to quench their thirst. This is what Pope Francis wants to remind us of when he says:

*“Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues appear, new pathways of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world”<sup>2</sup>.*

Returning to the Wellspring consists in becoming more and more the friend of Jesus, he who made himself one of us through his incarnation. In other words, in Jesus, God becomes man so that man may become God. Jesus is therefore teaching us friendship with God.

In fact, returning to the Wellspring leads to living our friendship with Jesus in the footsteps of our Founders, especially Jean-Marie de la Mennais. To achieve this, the Christological hymn of the Apostle Paul to the Philippians (Phil 2: 5-11) in which we find essential aspects of the Mennaisian spirituality will provide us with some important benchmarks. Thus, the roots of the tree of the Mennaisian Family must draw from the Wellspring of Living Water which is Jesus if its branches are to keep all their greenness and continue to bear fruit.

## **1- Being in the Very Nature of God**

*“Christ Jesus who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage” (Ph 2: 5-6)*

This passage clarifies the identity of Jesus. He is God and his name is Christ Jesus. In Hebrew, Jesus means *"God saves"* while Christ which corresponds to the Greek term *"Christos"* or Hebrew *"Maschiach - Messiah"* means *"anointed, consecrated, set apart to be sent"*. What does he who is the Messenger of God come to accomplish? Unlike the man who jealously retains his rank and privileges, Jesus gives himself up, gives himself out of pure love. In so doing, he reveals to us the true identity of God

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n° 11.



who is fundamentally a free gift to mankind. In his Son, Word made flesh, God expresses to us his love which generates Life. It is this essential truth that the Gospel of John reveals when Jesus says to Nicodemus: "*God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him will not be lost but will obtain eternal life*" (Jn 3:16).

Christ Jesus, the Father's Envoy, gradually introduces us to the logic of giving. His words and the testimony of his life invite us to give our life like the grain of wheat which falls into the earth and which accepts to die so as to bear fruit (Jn 12:24). What makes our gift fruitful and multiply tenfold is love: "*There is no greater love than to lay down your life for those you love*" (Jn 15:13). Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus teaches us that all that is not given is lost. Thus, his whole person is a gift, an offering and a Eucharist. "*To be a disciple of Christ Jesus is to have in oneself these dispositions, this state of mind, this mentality of welcoming the gift, far from monopolizing it.*"<sup>3</sup>

In response to the Master's example, Christians, men and women, young people and adults, have learned self-giving. In the past, some offered their lives to Christ. Deacon Stephen was stoned out of fidelity to his Christian faith (Acts 7: 58-60). Ignatius of Antioch agreed to go to Rome to be ground by the beasts in order to become the immaculate bread of Christ.<sup>4</sup> Under Emperor Marcus Aurelius, Blandine de Lyon, a young slave, born around 162, was slaughtered in August 177 by her executioner when she refused to renounce her faith. Even today, there are still many who continue to shed their blood for the cause of Jesus. This is the case, among others, of Father Jacques Hamel. Indeed, on July 26, 2016, two terrorists claiming to be from an Islamic State entered the Church of Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray and murdered the priest while he was celebrating the Eucharist. On September 14, 2016, Pope Francis, on the feast of

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<sup>3</sup> Supplément Cahiers Évangile n° 164, L'hymne aux Philippiens, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Saint Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Romans.

the glorious Cross, while confirming that Father Hamel belongs to the long chain of martyrs, highlighted the strength of his testimony. Father Hamel *“gave his life for us, he gave his life so as not to deny Jesus. He gave his life in the very sacrifice of Jesus on the altar”*.<sup>5</sup>

How does Jean-Marie de la Mennais invite us to practice self-giving today, after the example of Jesus and of the martyrs in the Church? First of all, he invites us to make our own the attitude of the Son: *“Sublime vocation! It is that of Jesus Christ himself; he only left his Father’s womb to do what you are going to do after his example.”*<sup>6</sup> What did he do? He gave his life to proclaim the Good News to the poor, to free the captives, to heal the sick and to show the Father’s tenderness to the afflicted (Lk 4:18). Then, Jean-Marie de la Mennais exhorts us to imitate his availability by learning to listen to the Son, while being ready to accomplish whatever he tells us with joy and love. He then encourages us to have but one desire: never to put up the slightest resistance to what the Lord asks of us and to surrender ourselves entirely to him.<sup>7</sup> Finally, our Founder urges us to be women and men according to the heart of God, that is to say, Lay people and *“zealous Brothers, ready to undertake and to suffer everything to spread his word, extend his reign and kindle that divine fire which Jesus Christ brought into the world”*.<sup>8</sup>

When the last General Chapter *commits each Brother and each community to live more and more ‘in a Mennaisian Family Mode’* (n° 16), it certainly intends to invite us to welcome into our homes, Jesus, the Father’s Envoy, who has given himself to us by way of his availability. Who better than Mary knew how to follow her Son more closely through the gift of self? Indeed, after welcoming Jesus, the gift par excellence, into her home, she sets

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, Homily, September 14, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 525.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, GC I, 127.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 549-550.

out to serve her cousin Elizabeth. In so doing, far from self-centring, she becomes a woman for others. Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, former Superior General of the Jesuits, explains it this way:

*“The grace with which Mary is filled urges her out of her home, out of her everyday life. It makes her take to the mountain road and become, in the name of her Lord, ‘a woman for others’... Her eagerness to disregard herself, to leave those around her, the joy that bursts in her meeting Elizabeth, are the natural outcomes of setting out, of the exodus which love that comes from above induces. Whoever is seized by the love of God is urged to embody him, here and now.”<sup>9</sup>*

## **2- Taking the Very Nature of a Servant**

*“But Christ Jesus made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Ph 2: 7)*

The apostle Paul presents Christ Jesus as the Servant. In him, God puts himself at the service of mankind. He annihilates himself freely. He empties himself to better serve his creatures. He renounces a status: he does not jealously retain the rank which makes him equal to God (Phil 2: 6). He descends to the bottom of the ladder by agreeing to become a servant. In the Hebrew vocabulary, there is only one word to mean servant and slave: "*ebed*". It is the same thing in the Greek language: "*doulos*". In Jesus, God becomes our slave, but freely and out of love. Thus, he makes himself poor among the poor. This is the fundamental meaning of the gesture made by Jesus, on the eve of his Passion, when he washes the feet of his disciples (Jn 13: 1-5).

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<sup>9</sup> F. Hans-Peter Kolvenbach, Letter to the Company of Jesus, March 1998.

Extraordinary wonder of love: God kneels before us to wash our feet. Indeed, the act of Jesus is an example which is both a calling and a challenge.

*“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”* (John 13: 14-17)

By this gesture, Jesus introduces a new beatitude: that of the Master who serves and who invites his friends to follow his example. He overturns the Jewish custom that the disciple should serve the master by washing the feet of those he has chosen to be with him. He thus changes the relationship to the point of considering them as friends, because he has made known to them everything he has heard from the Father (Jn 15:15). A Master, both servant and friend! Thus, he fulfills his real mission: not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for the multitude (Mk 10: 45). In this sense, the revolution that Jesus brings *"is played out in a new frame of mind that radically emphasizes the service of others."*<sup>10</sup>

From the beginning, the Church took seriously Christ’s call to live the beatitude of service. For her, serving neighbor is a concrete pedagogy for expressing her love for God. To wash the feet of a brother is to restore to him all his dignity as an image of God. Very quickly, the ministry of deacons was established, the main purpose of which was to preside over the service of charity (Acts 6: 1-7). The Apostles and the Fathers of the Church have always kept the flame of service alive in the hearts of Christians. Aphraate the Wise, who lived in the first half of the 4th century

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<sup>10</sup> Camille Focant, *Lettres aux Philippiens et à Philémon : clés de lecture*, Cahiers Évangile n° 188, p. 28.

in the region of Nineveh, the Mosul of present-day Iraq, shows humility as the virtue which helps the disciple to serve at the example of the Master. Thanks to humility, a Christian, like a good tree, can bear fruits which are pleasing to the Lord: *"If the root of man is planted in the earth, his fruits ascend to the Lord of greatness."*<sup>11</sup> Benedict of Nursia, founder of monasticism in the West, sees monastic life as a *"school for learning to serve the Lord"*.<sup>12</sup> Through constant practice, a monk becomes a disciple of Christ who humbly washes the feet of his brothers.

As for Jean-Marie de la Mennais, he defines humility as a two-way street: in Jesus, God puts it on to come and stay with us and, as for us, it leads us to God. It makes us into the likeness of Christ and makes us participate in the life of God which is above all an eternal self-effacement so that others can exist:

*"Humility is the most necessary virtue since it is the foundation of all the other virtues, and without it, we cannot be in any way like Christ, whose birth, life and death were, so to speak, a great act of humility."*<sup>13</sup>

In fact, imitating the humility of Christ results from the wisdom acquired through contact with his life, model of how to be a Son. This translates into proximity, simplicity, transparency, gentleness, availability and humble service.

Humility strips us of the old man to clothe us with Christ and make us disciples of the Master, friend and servant, as Jean-Marie de la Mennais reminded the Daughters of Providence:

*"The Sisters will remember the words and examples of Jesus Christ and of the Saints. They taught that Christians must annihilate the old man in themselves in order to become new creations in God; to lower themselves, to be raised; to decay in the ground, to*

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<sup>11</sup> Aphraate le Sage, Exposés 9, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Saint Benedict, Rule, Prologue, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 649.

*germinate and grow; in a word, to pass humbly through the annihilation of the earthly man to enter into the glory of the spiritual man.*"<sup>14</sup>

Like the grain of wheat that has fallen to the ground, this virtue flourishes in our life when we accept to die with the One who gives Life, when we recognize ourselves as the last of all or the least (1 Cor 15: 8).

Through humility we become one with Christ. He lives in us and we live in him. The more we progress in humility, the more we enter his intimacy and the more his feelings, desires, thoughts and actions become our standards of reference and of decision.<sup>15</sup>

Humility is the source which gives fecundity to our apostolate. "*All the success of our work depends on the progress we will have made in humility.*"<sup>16</sup> Humility allows us to count, not on our own human strength, but on the Lord who wants to accomplish great things in us and through us. Thus, we will be true missionary disciples of Christ the servant, able to step aside in favor of the Master who has the words of eternal life (Jn 6: 68), to be new 'John the Baptists' who cry out in the desert and who prepare the way of the Lord (Jn 1: 23).

Jean-Marie de la Mennais not only urged us to be humble, but he also lived humbly in his daily life. His whole life prolongs, in its own way, the humility of Jesus. Bishop Laveille summarizes this masterfully:

*"This man, distinguished by birth, born in wealth, accustomed to dealing with the most cultivated minds of his time, and from the start of his career exalted to the most prominent ecclesiastical offices, - this man confined himself to the center of Brittany, in a remote country almost inaccessible at that time. There, he surrounded himself with young uneducated peasants*

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<sup>14</sup> Marcel Doucet, Jean-Marie de la Mennais, Anthology, Chapter 12, RDP.

<sup>15</sup> Philippe Friot, The Spirituality of a Man of Action, p. 212-213.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 650.

*and, at the cost of countless sacrifices, applied himself to educating them, not to raise them to his level and to find in them, after a few years, men capable of thinking and feeling like him, but to give them the rudimentary culture of countryside teachers. In order to exercise this modest role of catechist and teacher until extreme old age, ... he gave up the highest intellectual satisfactions and, in a way, downgraded himself to becoming and remaining to the end, at least through daily chores, 'the ignoramus Breton'."*<sup>17</sup>

If we want to live more and more "*in a Mennaisian Family Mode*", we must strive, day by day, to be in the likeness of Christ, the humble servant. Following his example and invitation, let us learn to occupy the last place. Let us welcome the grace of being unprofitable servants (Lk 17:10). Let us train ourselves to wash each others' feet. Let us imitate the big-heartedness of the Master who made himself our servant to become our friend and brother. Let us not be afraid to kneel in front of our sisters and brothers to serve them.

### **3- Becoming Obedient to Death**

*"And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Ph 2: 8)*

For Paul, Jesus' obedience is a single lowering movement in two stages, namely the incarnation, then death on the cross. Indeed, the Son of God freely becomes flesh and makes his dwelling among us to become our brother. Out of love, he accepts to die to restore our filial dignity to us. Even more impressively, he died on the cross: scandal for the Jews and folly for the pagans (1 Cor 1:23). In the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 10, the author

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<sup>17</sup> Mgr. Laveille quoted by Brother Philippe Friot: *Spirituality of a Man of Action*, p. 81-82.

emphasizes the fundamental unity that obedience establishes between incarnation and redemption. For him, the coming of Jesus in our flesh is part of his desire to do the will of the Father: *"Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; ... Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come to do your will, my God.'"* (Heb 10: 5.7) His freely accepted death on the cross, an extension of his lowering, brought us redemption and sanctification, thanks to the offering he made of his body once and for all (Heb 10:10).

*"To obey to death, even death on the cross"* (Phil 2: 8), was a long struggle and a laborious apprenticeship for Jesus! In the desert, the devil leads him to a very high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world with their glory and says to him: *"All this I will give you, if you bow down to worship me"* (Mt 4: 8). But Jesus refuses his proposal by putting him in his place: *"Get back, Satan! for it is written: 'You shall bow down to the Lord your God, and you shall worship him alone'"* (Mt 4:10). Thus, Jesus opts for obedience to the will of God which consists in kneeling before God alone. During the Passion, on the Mount of Olives, Jesus prays to his Father and tells him of his fear of death, while renewing his readiness to do his will (Mt 26: 39-42).

Obedying and dying to oneself are two requirements as followers of Christ. This is what the evangelist Luke believes when he affirms: *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."* (Lk 9: 23-24). In this sense, walking in the footsteps of Jesus, renouncing oneself, taking up one's cross are all gestures that express our desire to die to ourselves in order to belong to Christ whose food is to do the will of the Father (Jn 4:34). In so doing, we no longer live as enemies, but rather as friends of the cross of Christ (Phil 3:18).

From the very beginnings of the Church, obedience and the cross have occupied a central place in the Christian faith. We need only remember the response of Peter and of the Apostles to



the Sanhedrin: "*We must obey God rather than men*" (Acts 5:29). As a result, they were beaten and prohibited from speaking in Jesus' name. Did they not joyfully go away at having been deemed worthy to suffer for Christ (Acts 5: 40-42)? Saint Jerome, born around 347 and died around 420, is the translator of the Bible into Latin, commonly known as the Vulgate. For him, obedience is the highest virtue and the most pleasing to God.<sup>18</sup> Saint Benedict, for his part, insists on listening to the brothers, especially the younger ones, because "*often the Lord shows to a younger brother what is best*".<sup>19</sup>

Ignatius of Loyola<sup>20</sup> (1491-1556), the Founder of the Jesuits, evokes stages in the discernment of the will of God, what he calls the three degrees of humility. But this term should be well understood. For our author, he is humble who recognizes himself as dependent on God and who is convinced that his salvation, his happiness is linked to the accomplishment of what is in accordance with the will of the Creator. The first degree of humility consists in stooping as much as is possible and necessary to seek and achieve all that pleases the Lord. The second degree, more perfect than the first, aims at acquiring that indifference which makes it possible to welcome wealth or poverty, honors or contempt, health or disease, success or failure, provided that all of this leads to greater love for, and more intimacy with, the Lord. The third degree encompasses the first two and leads to making Christ the absolute center and the total meaning of one's life. All that matters is to be with Christ, in poverty, insults, success, glory and in whatever else. Because of him, we accept to lose everything in order to gain a single advantage: to be his in everything (Phil 3: 8).

Origen, born in Alexandria around 185 and died around 253 in Tyre, a region of present-day Lebanon, presents the cross as the route a Christian must travel if he wants his life to be an

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<sup>18</sup> Saint Jerome, Homelia de oboedientia : CCL 78, 552.

<sup>19</sup> Saint Benedict, Rule, 3, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Spiritual Exercises, Second Week.

offering pleasing to God. *"If I renounce all that I have and take up my cross and follow Christ, I offer my burnt offering on the altar of God; and if I surrender my body to be burned and have charity and have access to the glory of martyrdom, I offer my burnt offering on the altar of God."*<sup>21</sup> For his part, Tertullian, the African, born in Carthage towards the end of the second century, underscores the fecundity of the cross: *"The blood of martyrs is a seed of Christians."*<sup>22</sup>

Benedict XVI presents the cross as the manifestation of the power of God's love which saves mankind:

*"The 'scandal' and 'folly' of the Cross are found precisely in the fact that, where there seems to be only failure, pain, defeat, precisely there is all the power of the infinite Love of God, for the Cross is an expression of love and love is the true power which is revealed precisely in this apparent weakness."*<sup>23</sup>

By surrendering himself to the will of the Father, the Crucified is wisdom for he truly expresses who God is, namely, the power of love that goes as far as the Cross to redeem us. In other words, the Christ whom God identified for us with sin (2 Cor 5: 21) died for all (2 Cor 5: 14). In his person, God has reconciled us to himself by not keeping an account of our sins (2 Cor 5: 18-20).

Jean-Marie de la Mennais defines obedience as a way of self-denial and of surrender to God. For him, Jesus Crucified is the perfect model. This is the meaning of his exhortation to Brother Ambroise Le Haiget:

*"I would like to see you more resigned to the holy will of God, and more eager to become conformed to Jesus*

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<sup>21</sup> Origen, Homily on Leviticus 9, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Tertullian, Apologetics, 50, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Benedict XVI, General audience, October 29, 2008.

*Christ crucified: you will have peace of soul and you will taste joy in your heart only in as much as you make yours these holy dispositions of surrender to God and of self-denial."*<sup>24</sup>

If we want to live in peace and experience joy in our heart, the itinerary proposed by our Founder is that of readiness to do the will of God, even if we must go through the cross. As he knows the difficulties of the course, he provides us with a methodology to move forward. He therefore advises us to be women and men of good will, like the shepherds ready to go looking for the Newborn. He recommends that we lose ourselves in God, that we let him lead us even in the smallest things, that we always walk in the light of his face and that we take the happy and holy habit of seeing God and of seeing only God in everything.<sup>25</sup>

To exhort us to become obedient until death, and death on the cross if necessary, following the example of Christ Jesus, Jean-Marie de la Mennais develops a full spirituality of the cross. First of all, this is the place of our new birth. United with Jesus Crucified, we learn self-emptying in order to be new creatures in Christ. If the cross is welcomed and accepted, it can purify our earthly affections and our feelings of vainglory, of curiosity, of greed and of worldliness. We are exhorted to know only one thing, namely, "*Jesus and Jesus Crucified, whether we are despised, insulted, persecuted. All of this should not matter, or rather we should rejoice.*"<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the cross is the place where we, in turn, learn to love God and neighbor with unconditional love. As we contemplate "*crucified charity,*"<sup>27</sup> like Jesus, we practice

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<sup>24</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, Letter to Brother Ambroise Le Haiget, February 9, 1837.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S I, 111.

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 655.

<sup>27</sup> Marcel Doucet, Jean-Marie de la Mennais, Anthology, Chapter 4, To Bruté regarding Mgr. de la Romagère who replaced him as the head of the Diocese of Saint-Brieuc.

responding to insult, ingratitude and mockery with forgiveness. Armed with this spiritual experience, we avoid breaking the already crushed reed and hurting those who hurt us the most.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, the cross is a life-fostering teacher for it "*contains all that we must know and reveals all that we must put into practice*".<sup>29</sup> The more we contemplate it and the more we put into practice what it teaches us, the more we will succeed in unifying our lives and living what our intelligence has understood and our heart has loved.

To live more and more "*in a Mennaisian Family Mode*" is learning to come together to listen to the Spirit so as to discern the will of God for the social body that we are. It is also welcoming him even if it requires us to go through the cross. It is gradually acquiring the happy and holy habit of seeing God and seeing only God in everything. It is accepting the permanent purification that our daily crosses, large or small, carry out in us. It is learning, day after day, from Jesus Crucified because he alone can teach us free and unselfish love, forgiveness and constancy in life.

#### **4- Exalted by God**

*"Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name."* (Ph 2: 9)

Paul highlights the glorification of Christ by the Father: "*God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.*" By this affirmation, the Apostle reveals the paschal glory of Christ<sup>30</sup> who, after death, manifests himself again in the splendor of his divine majesty. On the other hand, in the biblical tradition, the name expresses the essence and

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<sup>28</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, Letter to Brother Lucien Deniau, June 7, 1843.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 505.

<sup>30</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Catechesis on the hymn of the epistles to the Philippians, October 26, 2005.

identity of the person. It manifests a person's intimate and deep reality. On his Son, who, out of love, made himself "*obedient unto death, and death on the cross*" (Phil 2: 8), the Father confers an unmatched dignity, the Name par excellence, that of Lord. "*Jesus Christ is Lord*" (Phil 2:11).

The glory which the Son receives from the Father (Jn 8:54), passing through death on the cross and the resurrection, is offered us to share. "*As the serpent was lifted up by Moses in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, so that in him everyone who believes may have eternal life*" (Jn 3: 14-15). The glory of the Father and of the Son comes from our bearing much fruit (Jn 15: 8). This superabundant fruitfulness is none other than eternal life. Thus, through the Risen Christ, God gives us fullness of life as an inheritance. Being disciples of the One who received the Name which is above every name, that of Lord, we henceforth belong to the family of the saints (1 Pet 2: 9) and to the people of the blessed (Mt 5: 1-12). "*Basically, holiness consists in associating oneself with the death and resurrection of the Lord in a unique and personal way, in dying and constantly being risen with him.*"<sup>31</sup>

Before his passion and resurrection, during the great priestly prayer, Jesus asked the Father that his disciples be where he is and that they contemplate his glory, that which he gave him before the foundation of the world (Jn 17: 24). So as to follow through on this intercession of Christ, the Church has always accompanied Christians on the path to holiness. Thus, Saint Irenaeus of Lyon (130-202), by meditating on the beatitude of the pure of hearts, exhorts his faithful to respond to their own vocation, that of seeing God.

*"Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God (Mt 5: 8). Just as those who see the light are in the light and participate in its splendor, similarly those who see God are in God and participate in his glory, life-giving*

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<sup>31</sup> Pope Francis, Gaudete et Exultate, n° 20.

*splendor, and thus those who see God will have a part in Life... There is life only through participation in God, and this participation in God consists in seeing God and enjoying his Goodness. The Glory of God is man fully alive, and man's life is seeing God."*<sup>32</sup>

Saint Athanasius of Alexandria conceives of holiness as a deification of man made possible by the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. Gregory of Nazianze specifies that it is the quest to be like Christ who "*took upon himself what is the worst, to give us what is best*".<sup>33</sup> Gregory of Nyssa defines it as the full realization of man by becoming like God who is righteous, holy and good and by being as perfect as the Father.<sup>34</sup>

Jean-Marie de la Mennais understands holiness as a configuration to Christ Jesus. "*None of us will enter into the bosom of God unless he conforms to the image of his Son*".<sup>35</sup> For him, Jesus is the way that leads to sharing in the glory of the Father. But how can one be configured to Christ? To achieve this, our Founder suggests that we make the Son the central reference in our life.

*"When God says that he wants our sanctification, it is as if he said that he wants to find in us the perfections of his Son, that we be in some way, as far as human weakness allows, clothed with Jesus Christ, as the Apostle says, that we follow Jesus Christ in all his ways, that we judge of all things as he judged, that we love what he loved, that we despise what he despised, that we hate what he hated. In short, that all our thoughts be in accordance with his thoughts and that we be his living image."*<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Saint Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 4, 20, 5.7.

<sup>33</sup> Grégoire de Nazianze, *Discours*, 1, 5 ; SC 247, p. 78.

<sup>34</sup> Grégoire de Nysse, *Sur l'oraison dominicale* 2, PG 44, 1145ac.

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 497.

<sup>36</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 631-632.

Taking the path of holiness indicated by Jean-Marie de la Mennais lets baptismal grace flourish in our life in all its fullness. In fact, at baptism, God clothed us with holiness and marked us with his seal.<sup>37</sup> As a result, baptismal consecration configures us to Christ king, priest and prophet. As king, we participate in the exercise of his charity towards men. As priest, we offer our life for the redemption of the world. As prophet, we work zealously for the glory of the Father.

Living more and more "*in a Mennaisian Family Mode*" is learning, day after day, to love like Jesus, to follow him in all his ways and to be his living image. It is practicing daily echoing the yes of the Son that gives access to the fullness of God (Eph 3:19). It is working daily at perfecting the divine imprint received at baptism. It is letting Christ grow in us to the state of the perfect Man (Eph 4:13).

## 5- In the Name of Jesus

*"...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth..." (Ph 2: 10)*

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Father endows him with a new Name. He is the Lord. The apostle Paul emphasizes his sovereignty: In the name of Jesus, every knee bows in heaven, on earth and under the earth. Thus, "*Christ is worthy of the homage of the whole creation because he allows God to reveal himself as Father when he gives his name to the One in whom he recognizes his completed image.*"<sup>38</sup>

Calling on the name of Jesus is both a prayer and a profession of faith. Jesus himself reassures us: The Father will give us whatever we ask him in his Name (Jn 15:16). He encourages us to dare test our faith: "*Up to now you have not*

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<sup>37</sup> Marcel Doucet, Jean-Marie de la Mennais, Anthology, Chapter 15, Sermon on the profession of a Sister, S VIII, 2168-70.

<sup>38</sup> Camille Focant, Lettres aux Philippiens et à Philémon : clés de lecture, Cahiers Évangile n° 188, p. 32.

*asked for anything in my name; ask, and you will receive*" (Jn 16: 24). During his public life, Jesus answered the many faith-filled requests that were made to him. Among others, those of the leper (Mk 1: 40-42), of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7: 26-29) and of the good thief (Lk 23: 39-43). He welcomed the silently expressed wishes such as those of the carriers of the paralytic (Mk 2: 3-5), of the bleeding women who touched his garment from behind (Mk 5: 27-29), of the sinner in tears at Simon's home (Lk 7: 37-38). Thus, as in the old days, Christ Jesus, who knows better than anyone what we need, stands ready to answer our requests and to intercede for us with his Father, provided we invoke his Name with faith and perseverance.

Prayer has always been a central element in the life of Christians. Like water, it irrigates and accompanies growth until maturity and harvest time. This is what explains the insistence of many Fathers of the Church on its importance. For Saint Justin<sup>39</sup>, the daily and assiduous encounter with Christ opens the doors to light for Christians. Origen<sup>40</sup> presents *lectio divina*, that is to say the prayerful reading of the Word of God, as the way to know and love Jesus Christ because it is by knocking that the door will be open to us and it is by asking that we will find what our heart is looking for (Mt 7, 7). Saint Jerome suggests that we make the Word of God our companion and our teacher. This is the only way to become a friend of Jesus: "*To ignore the Scriptures is to ignore Christ.*"<sup>41</sup> Saint Cyprian, for his part, invites us to let our heart speak when we address ourselves to the Lord. "*We must not scatter our prayers in loose words or throw to God, in loud chatter, a request which should be commended for its modesty, for God listens, not to the voice but to the heart.*"<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Saint Justin, Dialogue with Tryphon 7, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Origen, Letter to Gregory, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, General audience, Catechesis on Saint Jerome, November 7, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Saint Cyprian, Sunday Meditation, 4.



Saint Gregory of Nazianze exhorts us to incessant prayer by asking us to remember God more often than we breathe. For him, prayer is the meeting of two thirsts, that of God and ours. "*God thirsts for our thirst for him.*"<sup>43</sup> Saint Gregory of Nyssa conceives of prayer as a place of purification of the heart so as to be faithful to our Christian commitments. "*Through prayer we succeed in being with God ... It supports and defends chastity, restraints anger, appeases and controls pride. Prayer is the guardian of virginity, the protection of fidelity in marriage, hope for the watchmen.*"<sup>44</sup>

For Saint Augustine, Christ "*prays for us as our priest, he prays in us as our head, he is prayed by us as our God. Let us therefore recognize our voices in him and his voice in us.*"<sup>45</sup> Saint Benedict defines prayer as an act of listening to the Lord in his Word.<sup>46</sup>

Jean-Marie de la Mennais starts from the conviction that every Christian is called upon to make his life an incessant prayer (1 Th 5:17). Quite a challenge: how is this possible? To substantiate his advice, he asserts that "*prayer is but love and love is the most beautiful as well as the most perfect of prayers.*"<sup>47</sup> If someone is truly in love, his whole life will be imbued with this passion and it will color and flavor who he is and what he does.

For our Founder, praying is living a communion of love with the person of Jesus Christ so that our prayers are intimately united with his and are but one voice with him.<sup>48</sup> And if, over time, this amorous passion loses its strength and intensity, he

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<sup>43</sup> Saint Gregory of Nazianze, Speeches 27, 4.

<sup>44</sup> Saint Gregory of Nyssa, On Sunday Meditation, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Saint Augustine, Psalm 85, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Saint Benedict, Rule, Prologue, 9-11.

<sup>47</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 176.

<sup>48</sup> Marcel Doucet, Jean-Marie de la Mennais, Anthology, Chapter 8, On prayer, S IV, 1469-71.

recommends two ways to "*rekindle the fire of divine love*": the "*holy exercise of the presence of God and the meditation of the passion of Jesus Christ.*"<sup>49</sup>

To achieve incessant prayer, Jean-Marie recommends the silence of lovers which creates the conditions for listening to "*this interior word which teaches from within, and which, according to the expression of the prophet, spreads deep in our hearts like dew.*"<sup>50</sup> He advocates regular meditation of the Word of God, especially the Gospel of Saint John. "*To know Jesus Christ well, we must search the scriptures, and he himself gave us this advice. Above all, it is necessary to read and reread again, with a soul afire with faith and love, the divine Gospel of the beloved disciple. Each word must be meditated on, tasted, savored with delight.*"<sup>51</sup> He even wants each of us to have a New Testament that we will read, if not a chapter, at least a few verses<sup>52</sup> every morning. Putting the Word of God at the center of our life and making it our daily food is the way he suggests we will become more and more Christ-like.

Living more and more "*in a Mennaisian Family Mode*" means knowing how to spend time at Jesus' feet contemplating him, adoring him, listening to him and being with him. It means establishing a dialogue of love with the One who prays for us, who prays in us and who is prayed by us. It means having a daily heart-to-heart that expresses our thirst for Living Water. It means frequently nourishing ourselves with the Word which satisfies, which purifies the heart, which rejuvenates, and which gradually introduces us into greater friendship with Christ Jesus.

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<sup>49</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, Letter to Brother Hippolyte Morin, March 31, 1829.

<sup>50</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S I, 485.

<sup>51</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, GC I, 58.

<sup>52</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S I, 603.

## 6- To the Glory of God the Father

*"... and that every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* (Ph 2: 11)

In the hymn to the Philippians (2: 5-11), Paul presents Christ Jesus as the origin (Phil 2: 5) and the end of everything (2: 11). In him everything is recapitulated *"to the glory of God the Father"* (Phil 2: 11c). In Jesus, God comes down to us to lead us to our Father. Consequently, he is the Way: no one goes to the Father without passing through him (Jn 14: 6). In everything, he seeks the glory of the One who sent him (Jn 5: 44; 7: 18; 8: 54).

In the tradition of the Church, Christians have learned to give glory to the Lord for all the wonders he performs in their lives. He alone is at the origin of all good for which we must give him thanks. Each Eucharist celebrates this. The *Gloria* at Sunday Mass and on solemnities professes this. The testimonies of the saints witness to this: they strove to dedicate their entire lives to the glory of God. Saint Augustine's *Confessions* is a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God because the Lord has done wonders in his life despite his own frailties and sins. Saint Ignatius of Loyola proposed to the congregation he founded the motto: *"Ad majorem Dei gloriam - For the greater glory of God"*. For him, praising the Lord and serving one's brothers constitute one and the same activity. Everything is and must be done for the greater glory of God.

Jean-Marie de la Mennais, through his life and works, wished to act for God alone. This is the meaning of our motto: God alone must be the motivation for everything we are and do. So, he invites us to examine our actions from our fundamental option: *"Have we not lost all our merits? Have we not defiled them by attributing all the glory to ourselves? Have we worked for God,*

*for God alone?"*<sup>53</sup> As soon as the opportunity arises, he urges us to report all our successes to the Lord, the source of all grace, and he asks us to act for God alone. For Jean-Marie, only a life configured to that of Jesus truly brings glory to God. "*The sacrifice of Jesus Christ was complete: he renounced goods, honors, the conveniences of life, from the manger to Calvary, renouncing his family to look after the interests and the glory of his Father... This is what we must imitate.*"<sup>54</sup>

To live more and more "*in a Mennaisian Family Mode*" means to act for God alone, to do everything for his glory after the example of Christ Jesus.

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<sup>53</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 615-616.

<sup>54</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 642.

## CHAPTER II

### REACHING OUT TO OTHERS

Reaching out to others is the second gateway offered by our last General Chapter to the Mennaisian Family that would like to open new pathways of fraternity. It is also the means used by Jesus to teach us to live as brothers and sisters. Did not the scribes and the Pharisees often reproach him his choice of associates? Indeed, seeing him seated at Zacchaeus' table, they disowned him by saying that he had gone to stay with a sinner (Lk 19: 7). At Simon's, he accepts the gestures of affection and care of a woman of bad reputation (Lk 7: 36-50). To the Samaritan woman who is astonished when he speaks to her and asks her for a drink, and to the apostles who are surprised to see him speak with this woman (Jn 4: 4-42), Jesus' advice is to widen their orbit to give to their "*capacity to love a universal dimension capable of overcoming all prejudices, all historical or cultural barriers, all petty interests*".<sup>55</sup>

Reaching out to others daily opens new pathways of fraternity through mutual love, by "*the witness of the charity of Christ towards all, especially towards the least and most in need*".<sup>56</sup> This is a whole program of life, the realization of which depends on our ability to put ourselves at the school of him through whom we are no longer strangers or people passing through, but members of the one family of God (Eph 2:19).

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<sup>55</sup> Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti, n° 83.

<sup>56</sup> CICLSAL, Identity of the Religious Brother in the Church, n° 11.

The story of Jesus' encounter with the children (Mk 10: 13-16), another fundamental text for Jean-Marie de la Mennais, will serve as a leading thread in our reflection. In this passage, Jesus teaches his apostles to reach out to others.

## **1- Trust**

*“People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them.” (Mk 10: 13)*

Mark the Evangelist paints a scene where two camps are opposed: people, probably parents, present children to Jesus for a blessing while the disciples, like bodyguards, push them away rather brusquely. What are these fathers and mothers looking for? They just want Jesus to bless their children. Why are the disciples hostile to this? In Jesus' day, children were excluded from the company of adults. Often seen as intrusive and spoiled, they can upset the good or bad habits of this one or that one.

By presenting their children to Jesus, parents reach out and show confidence. This is the complete opposite of the distrustful and aggressive attitude of the exclusionary, dismissive, pushing back and rough disciples. In reality, thanks to trust, others can be seen as a present, a gift, an opportunity that opens up to wonder, joy and collaboration. But if seen with mistrust, they quickly become a threat to be neutralized or eliminated, an obstacle to be circumvented or a burden to be cast aside.

In the biblical context, when the contract of trust is broken, the relationship is damaged and the possibility of reaching out to others seems difficult, if not impossible. So, after disobeying God, Adam and Eve hide from the voice of their Creator and blame each other. Cain denies being his brother Abel's keeper (Gn 4: 4-14). In the desert, the people of Israel revolt against Moses and want another leader to return to Egypt (Num 14: 1-4). Jonah sets

out to flee to Tarshish, far from Yahweh (Jon 1: 3). After the multiplication of the loaves and Jesus' announcement that he is the living bread that came down from heaven, many of his disciples parted ways with him (Jn 6: 66).

Conversely, when trust exists, it is possible to carry each other's burdens (Gal 6: 2), to pay attention to each other and to join hands to live in love (Heb 10: 24). When the storm hits our boat and we are afraid of sinking, the Lord always joins us in our night to invite us to trust (Mt 14: 27). When we recognize what isolates us and prevents us from reaching out to others, Jesus comes to our aid as he did blind Bartimaeus (Mk 10: 46).

In everyday life, trusting remains a challenge for anyone who wants to reach out to another. In fact, you put yourself in a situation of vulnerability in relation to others. You embark on the path of daily responsibility: trust is a dynamic reality. It is not acquired once and for all. It is built day after day. It connects us to each other and facilitates communication, cooperation and interdependence. *"It helps build long-term relationships and a connected network of relationships around which the ecosystem operates smoothly and efficiently."*<sup>57</sup>

The confidence to which Jean-Marie de la Mennais invites us imitates the attitude of Jesus who welcomes others, especially the most fragile and the weakest, without prejudice. For him, this is the best pedagogy to create give-and-take relationships that build friendship, allowing others to offer the best of themselves. Promoting openness helps everyone present themselves in their true light, with their strengths and wounds. Like a simple and docile child<sup>58</sup> who rests in his mother's arms, trust brings peace

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<sup>57</sup> <sup>57</sup> Éric Simon, *La confiance dans tous ses états*, Lavoisier « Revue française de gestion », 2007, n° 175, p. 90.

<sup>58</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, Letter to Bruté de Rémur, February 2, 1808.

to oneself and with others. But when it weakens, rejection, distancing, whispering, mistrust and mutual accusation ensue, as with Adam and Eve.<sup>59</sup>

At the call of Jesus and at the invitation of Jean-Marie de la Mennais, Brothers and Laity of the Mennaisian Family are invited to travel the route of mutual trust if they want to join hands to reach out to others and open new pathways of fraternity. This is the way to mutual appreciation. On both sides, fears and mistrust exist. Prejudices sometimes thwart our desire to live more and more "*in a Mennaisian Family Mode*". Do we not often hear it said that the invitation to open up to Lay people is a response to the lack of vocations and that it does not concern the whole Congregation? Has Jean-Marie de la Mennais founded the Mennaisian Family? How can we keep our specificity as Lay people and share the charism, the mission and the spirituality of the Congregation?

For mutual trust to grow, time and patience are needed. Like a shrub, confidence grows and develops when we water it daily and patiently with the water of attention and when we offer it the sunshine of proximity, the air of mutual knowledge, the nourishment of listening and the prop of thoughtfulness. Does not trust call for trust?

## **2- Let Them Come**

*"When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." (Mk 10: 14)*

Mark underscores the positive attitude of Jesus which contradicts that of the disciples. He wants to welcome; they try to thwart his attempt. Jesus protests vigorously. How can we understand the resistance of the disciples to the openness and

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<sup>59</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 551.



availability of their Master? They are probably afraid of being disturbed, bothered. Jesus invites them to go beyond self and show openness to others.

In the biblical tradition, Jesus denounces anything that is not in accordance with the will of the Father. He drives out the sellers from the temple who had turned it into a trading house (Jn 2: 13-21). He is deeply moved by the hard-hearted Pharisees who want to prevent him from healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath (Mk 3: 2-5). He protests against the hypocrisy of the Scribes (Mt 23: 13-15). He reminds the disciples of God's will: to let children come to him "*for the Kingdom of God is to those who are like them*" (Mk 10: 13).

Let them come: the expression is meaningful. It implies a double openness: the move of the one who takes the initiative by setting out and the attitude of the other person who opens his arms to welcome. In the Benedictine tradition, this translates into hospitality: the poor and pilgrims are received in the monastery "*with the greatest care and solicitude*".<sup>60</sup> For many Fathers of the Church, including Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Augustine, opening the heart to neighbors confirms the true love of God. "*We do not live better,*" Pope Francis says, "*when we flee, hide, refuse to share, stop giving and lock ourselves up in our own comforts. Such a life is nothing less than slow suicide.*"<sup>61</sup>

In everyday life, the person who opens up to others grows, matures and flourishes. The more one widens his social circle, the more one learns to lend a helping hand by opening himself up. This makes it possible to welcome those who are different and to receive their contribution to living together. Without this openness of mind and heart, others are condemned to live in an isolation which impoverishes and tarnishes the beauty of fraternity. We understand Father Franco Imoda better when he

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<sup>60</sup> Saint Benedict, Rule, 53, 15: « Pauperum et peregrinorum maxime susceptioni cura sollicitate exhibetur ».

<sup>61</sup> Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, n° 272.

says: "*The human person is not only enriched but accomplished when what is taken for granted is given up in favor of a world of ever more transcendent otherness.*"<sup>62</sup>

For Jean-Marie de la Mennais, openness is above all an interior reality which banishes jealousy, promotes fraternal communion and applauds the success of others. This is what our Founder urges us to do: "*Let us have a truly Catholic heart; may all those who, like us, work to enlarge the patrimony and the kingdom of Jesus Christ be always dear to us; let us be interested in their projects and their works as much as in ours.*"<sup>63</sup> It is this Catholic heart that enabled Jean-Marie de la Mennais to sign the Treaty of Union of June 6, 1819 with Father Gabriel Deshayes, the founding act of our Congregation. Moreover, Jean-Marie de la Mennais never wanted to open a school in Saint-Brieuc. This was his strategy to support and showcase the excellent work that the Brothers of the Christian Schools were doing in this city. Thus, God blesses and fecundates our initiatives when they allow a new openness to others and when they promote better collaboration with all those who work in the one vineyard of the Lord.

"Effata!" "Open up!" (Mk 7: 34)! It has been more than two thousand years since this cry was uttered to the deaf-mute whose healing Mark the Evangelist tells us about. Today, Jesus addresses this strong invitation to us, Lay people and Brothers of the Mennaisian Family. Are we ready to let the One who wants to recreate us to open our ears and untie our tongue?

As with the Apostles at Pentecost who were purified by the tongues of fire, the wind of the Spirit conquers our shyness and our fears and urges us to open our doors to invent new pathways of brotherhood together. Life is found in reaching out to others, not in withdrawing into oneself. Vitality belongs to those who

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<sup>62</sup> Franco Imoda, *Sviluppo umano, mistero e psicologia*, p. 84.

<sup>63</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, *S II*, 645.

dare to open up. Fertility meets those who set out in search of the others' promised land. This is a vital exodus for the Mennaisian Family whose presence *"has proved to be a source of renewal and fresh commitments, of audacious progress and of new fecundity"* (GC 2018, n° 16).

### **3- Welcome Like a Child**

*"Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."*  
(Mk 10, 15)

Through the voice of Jesus, Mark the evangelist shows us a new way of relating to others, namely, welcoming like a child. Why such a proposal which upsets the usual patterns? In Jesus' time, women and children were considered second-class people. Thus, during the multiplication of the loaves, Matthew notes that Jesus fed about five thousand men, *"without counting the women and the children"* (Mt 14: 21).

For Jesus, welcoming like a child is learning to live in simplicity (Mk 9: 35). Likewise, the child does not demand anything but receives everything as a gift from the Father. He does not rely on himself. He is devoid of pretension and sufficiency. It also means consenting to be reborn and to be converted by God to new ways of relating, after the example of Nicodemus (Jn 3: 1-21). It also implies accepting to make oneself small, to live in humility and to recognize one's weaknesses (Mt 18: 1-5). In other words, traveling the path of simplicity, of daily conversion and of humility leads to welcoming like a child.

Faithful to the teaching of the Master, the Church has always encouraged Christians to practice openness to others. In this way, Aphraate the Wise recognized, among others, two main qualities in a humble person: simplicity and readiness to convert. Saint Augustine, in his long quest for God, understood that we truly reach our neighbor through simplicity and humility. Saint Benedict affirms that humility enables people, especially monks,

to be more in the likeness of Christ who welcomes all, with particular attention to the least and most fragile. Pope Francis forever encourages the Church to be a community of "*brothers welcoming each other, taking care of one another*".<sup>64</sup> Learning to welcome others in simplicity and humility – like a child – allows them to be themselves while offering them the possibility of a new beginning.

In relational psychodynamics, welcoming like a child can help people perform at their very best. First of all, it presupposes a state of "virginity" which allows us to welcome others as they are and not as we would like them to be. Such an attitude inclines us to learn from others. It is the very behavior of the child that allows himself to be educated, trained, accompanied. Then, it requires creativity that includes the difficult habit of letting go and opening up to others so that we can dream and imagine things together. Finally, it requires equality. No one is superior to another. Everyone contributes their own contribution to the construction of the common house. Isn't that the best definition of love? Because "*to love is to want to exist by others and for others. By others implies receiving; for others involves giving.*"<sup>65</sup>

To help Brothers welcome like a child, Jean-Marie de la Mennais urges them to "*let themselves be led with childlike simplicity*".<sup>66</sup> Simplicity in relationships and in actions. As for Gabriel Deshayes, he considers this virtue as the key that gives access to everyone. "*It is by the simplicity of your life,*" he said to his Brothers, "*that you will acquire the esteem and affection of all.*"<sup>67</sup> Moreover, Jean-Marie also conceives of humility as a means of welcoming others like a child. He always encouraged the Brothers to make humility the backbone of their life. In his letters, he kept reminding them that it is the little children that

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<sup>64</sup> Pope Francis, Message for the World Day of Peace, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014.

<sup>65</sup> François Varillon, Joie de croire, joie de vivre, p. 63.

<sup>66</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 650.

<sup>67</sup> Gabriel Deshayes, Religious Calendar, June 30, 2020.

the Lord has blessed and to whom he has promised his kingdom. Thanks to her humility, Mary, Martha's sister, obtained the best part<sup>68</sup> by choosing to welcome Jesus into her home and listening to him.

In addition to urging Brothers to open their doors, Jean-Marie de la Mennais did so himself. During the French Revolution, as a young adolescent, he helped several priests in difficulty, including Father Louis Vielle, by leading them to the family home. In 1841, he opened the doors of the novitiate of Ploërmel to a few young Gascons sent by the Archbishop of Auch, Mgr de la Croix d'Azolette. A little later, he welcomed young people from Normandy. In 1849, a dozen young Englishmen recommended by Cardinal Wiseman arrived at the Motherhouse to begin their novitiate.

With humility and simplicity, the Brothers and the Lay people of the Mennaisian Family are invited to welcome one another. This entails giving time to others, listen to them with empathy and sympathy and being present to their moments of joy and sadness. It involves putting yourself in someone else's shoes to experience what they are experiencing from the inside and to walk with them at their own pace. It requires giving them a helping hand to forge ahead. It necessitates knowing how to offer your assistance at the right time and slip away when you need to.

In psychology, the child who opens up to welcoming others goes through three stages. In the first, he discovers caring, which refers to the ability to look after the well-being of others. In fact, he tries to take responsibility for the neighbor who needs his help. For instance, he does not hesitate to share his food with the dog, the cat, his mother, his father, his brother or his sister. In the second stage, the child experiences gratitude which introduces him to a reciprocal exchange. He gives and, at the same time, he

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<sup>68</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, Letter to Brother Julien Kerdavid, May 21, 1844.

learns to receive with joy, humility and simplicity. In the last stage, he opens up to amazement that allows him to acknowledge the beauty of all that surrounds him.

Knowing how to welcome like a child means welcoming others with a smile that makes them savor the joy of simplicity. It means looking at others with a benevolence that transmits to them the beauty of humility. It involves simple, calming gestures that communicate respect. It implies learning to give generously and to receive gratefully. This is a whole life plan for the Brothers and the Lay people of the Mennaisian Family if they want to reach out to others.

#### 4- Embrace

*“Jesus **took the children in his arms**, placed his hands on them and blessed them.” (Mk 10: 16)*

When stating that Jesus embraced children, Saint Mark intends to highlight the tenderness of God towards humanity. Indeed, embracing people expresses love, affection and closeness to them. This warm gesture strengthens ties, values others and signifies reconciliation. For instance, on the return of the prodigal son, the evangelist Luke specifies that the Father falls on his neck and covers him with kisses (Lk 15: 20). As Francine Vincent so well noted, the experience of God's tenderness makes it *“possible to forgive, to give above all else, to open one's arms to welcome the fragility of others, but also to give oneself body and soul, to give one's life so that the love of God can be spread.”*<sup>69</sup> By embracing children, Jesus shows his love for them and makes them his brothers.

In the New Testament, Jesus manifests his tenderness through concrete gestures. Indeed, his hands touch to give new life (Lk 7: 14), to heal (Mk 7: 34), to bless and love (Mk 13: 16).

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<sup>69</sup> Francine Vincent, *La théologie de la tendresse*, Appoint, September 2020, p. 13.

His gaze expresses his love (Mk 10: 21) and his forgiveness (Lk 22: 61). In short, his tenderness speaks of the closeness and affection that the Lord feels for all mankind.

Like the Master, the Church has always attached great importance to love for God and neighbor. For the Church, this double reality is intimately connected. This is the conviction of the apostle John: whoever claims to love God whom he does not see, while he does not love his brother whom he sees, is a liar (1 Jn 4:20). Saint Clement of Alexandria and Origen underscore the transforming action of Christian love. It is a light that opens the eyes of the heart, a life force that promotes unity. For Saint Gregory of Nazianze, it is a source of communion and of solidarity which allows people to take care of each other. *“Love,”* Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, *“grows through love. Love is divine because it comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process, it makes us a ‘we’ which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is all in all.”*<sup>70</sup>

In everyday life, and especially in these times of social distancing and the health crisis due to COVID-19, everyone is aware of the importance of gestures of affection for sound mental equilibrium. In this regard, Thomas de Eccleston reports a significant though reckless experience of Frederick II. This German emperor wanted to know what language humans would have spoken without the influence of education. He thought it would be Greek or Hebrew. To convince himself of this, he chose two newborns. He separated them from their mother and entrusted them to a nurse whose mission was to provide for their basic physiological needs: food, water, sleep, rest. But she should never speak to them while avoiding gestures of affection. Frederick II could not answer his question. After a few months, the two children died. In other words, in order to grow and live, a person must satisfy not only his/her basic biological needs but

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<sup>70</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, n° 18.

his/her needs for affection, love and relationship as well. Thus, "*love nourishes love and each step gives a new capacity to love.*"<sup>71</sup> It is the soul that gives strength, energy, dynamism and life to a human relationship and provides it with the tenderness necessary for the well-being of living together.

Jean-Marie de la Mennais provides his Brothers practical advice to educate them in brotherly love. He advises the practice of charity and tolerance in forgiving others rather than accusing them. He advocates carrying each others' burdens and acknowledging that ours is arguably heavier than anybody else's. He recommends applying the "*oil of charity*"<sup>72</sup> to mend and heal what has been hurt by "*minor frictions of character*".

Nurturing brotherly love is learning to be happy with the joy of others, to have compassion and to lend one another mutual support in order to come to God and accomplish his work. It is to avoid "*subjects of quarrel*", "*harsh or sour speech or reproach, marks of contempt or impatience*" (Rule of 1823). It is training to be close to each of your Brothers. It is striving to have "*that gentleness full of joy, peace, love and hope*"<sup>73</sup> for everyone, especially those it would be reasonable to complain about.

During his life, Jean-Marie de la Mennais did not only encourage his Brothers to live fraternal love, but he also set an example. Through the letters he wrote, he particularly demonstrates his affection for the Brothers and Daughters of Providence, his family, his friends. For instance, his correspondence always ends with an affectionate message such as: "*I embrace you, my dear Brother or my dear friend, very tenderly*". On April 26, 1808, he wrote to his "*fond friend*" Bruté de Rémur to invite him to Saint Malo where he would be delighted to offer him hospitality and where his joy would be at

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<sup>71</sup> As testified by Bernard et de Marie LEBRETON, in *Croire Aujourd'hui*, numéro spécial 2008: L'aventure du couple, p. 11.

<sup>72</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 603.

<sup>73</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, *Mémorial*, p. 123.



its highest. After the passing away of the father of Miss Hélène de Lucinière, whom our Founder affectionately calls "*my excellent friend*", he comforts her by reminding her that he shares her suffering and sadness. To Jean-Joseph Querret, whom Brother Arsène Pelmoine presents in "*Recherches Historiques*" n° 54 as the "*first lay Mennaisian*", Jean-Marie de la Mennais has always manifested an unwavering friendship made of tenderness and trust, proximity and respect. As a result, he did not hesitate to seek his participation in the intellectual formation of the Brothers.

Faithful to the legacy of the teachings of the Church and of our Founders, the Brothers and the Lay people of the Mennaisian Family are invited to live fraternal love in the small details of daily life. To achieve this, Saint Teresa of Calcutta provides us with a remarkably interesting methodology:

*"Don't imagine that love, to be true, has to be extraordinary. What we need is to keep loving. How is a lamp made to shine, if not by continuously adding small drops of oil to it? If there are no more drops of oil, there will be no more light ... What are these drops of oil in our lamps? They are the little things of everyday life: joy, generosity, small words of kindness, humility and patience, a thought for others, our way of being silent, of listening, of looking, of forgiving, of speaking and of behaving. These are the real drops of love that burn a whole lifetime with a living flame."*<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Mother Teresa of Calcutta, in « Croire aujourd'hui », Numéro spécial 2008: L'aventure du couple.

## 5- Bless

*"Jesus took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and **blessed** them." (Mk 10: 16)*

After pointing out the gesture of Jesus who embraces, Mark emphasizes another just as significant gesture: that of blessing. Indeed, Jesus blesses the children. The verb "to bless" comes from the Latin term "*benedicere*" which literally means "*to speak well*" of someone. In Hebrew, to bless is to give life. As he blessed the children, Jesus wished that God would help them develop and blossom to their full potential.

In the New Testament, God's blessing is synonymous with overabundance. The Lord gives us more than we need. What was impossible becomes possible. Thus, the crowd eats to repletion the bread blessed by Jesus and there is some left (Mt 14: 19-20, Mk 6: 41-42, Lk 9: 16-17). The overabundance of God now has a face: Jesus. In him, the Father "*has blessed us and filled us with the blessings of the Spirit*" (Eph 1: 3).

Being blessed then becomes a commitment to bless. Christians who bless imitate the generosity of the Father, "*for he makes his sun rise on the wicked and on the good, he makes rain fall on the just and on the unjust*" (Mt 5: 45). In so doing, they learn not to return evil for evil, nor insult for insult. On the contrary, they dedicate themselves to blessing others because that is their vocation (1 Pet 3: 9).

In order to fight against backbiting which consists in denigrating others, the Church has always encouraged Christians to be benevolent (Gal 5: 22) which is a superb pedagogy for learning to speak well of brothers. For Aphraate the Wise, a benevolent person is a humble person. Pope Francis never ceases to warn Christians against the temptation to slander. His words are rather strong when condemning gossip. He compares it to a scourge worse than COVID-19. He suggests two remedies as a cure: prayer which teaches us to bless instead of cursing and conversion of the heart which educates to benevolence.

Where the development of a human being is concerned, many psychologists are unanimous in recognizing that acknowledging someone's worth plays a determining role. Indeed, speaking well of others is to congratulate them on their qualities, their successes and their talents. It is wishing what's best for them, giving them the recognition they need to grow and thrive. It is giving them a hand to make their dreams come true. It is helping them to have confidence in themselves and to develop their potentialities.

In his educational pedagogy, Jean-Marie de la Mennais advocates a benevolent presence. The educator is the close big brother who builds confidence and motivates. He is the angel who fosters self-development. He is the good shepherd who calls everyone by name and who accompanies each stage of growth (Jn 10: 1-5). He is the father and mother who manage to put themselves in their children's shoes so they can share their joys, sorrows, difficulties and shortcomings. This explains Jean-Marie de la Mennais' insistence on the importance for Brothers to be good, benevolent and indulgent towards all. This is his advice to help them speak well of each other.

To be blessed and to bless, the Brothers and Laypeople of the Mennaisian Family are invited to:

- develop eagle eyes, which are said to be very sharp, so as to detect and see the best in each one;
- acquire the heart of the giraffe, this animal with the biggest heart, so as to love the beauty that is hidden deep in each person;
- have the artist's hands, skillful and delicate, to help others bring out the best in themselves.

## 6- Lay Hands On

*“Jesus took the children in his arms, **placed his hands on them** and blessed them.” (Mk 10: 16)*

Like a painter, Mark the evangelist portrays Jesus laying his hands on children. This gesture is not only that of sending on a mission, of the gift of the Spirit and of blessing but the bodily gesture also signifies protection and security. In fact, when Jesus lays his hands on someone, he reassures and creates the conditions for people to flourish and give their full measure.

In New Testament theology, Jesus lays his hands on people to purify (Mk 1: 40-42) and to heal (Mk 6: 4-5, Lk 4:40). The Apostles do this not only to tell the beggar to stand up and walk (Acts 3: 7-8) but also to send him on a mission (14: 26-28). In the latter case, this laying on of hands is a gesture of solidarity, of communion and of responsibility. He who is sent is not alone: he receives the assistance of the Holy Spirit and of the Church that send him. In short, whoever receives the laying on of hands is clothed with the strength of God which guarantees him steadfastness and perseverance in the pursuit of the good. Like Saint Paul, he abandons himself to the grace of God because the power of the Lord gives its full measure in his weakness (2 Cor 12: 9).

In the history of the Church, those who have been purified, healed, saved by Christ have become new creatures able to give their lives so that others may live. This is what the various martyrs over the centuries testify to: by shedding their blood like Christ, they glorify his name and show that the grace of the Lord always comes to the aid of our weaknesses. In the words of Saint Ambrosius,<sup>75</sup> Christ is the doctor who heals our wounds, the

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<sup>75</sup> Saint Ambroise, De Virginitate 16, 99.

fountain that soothes our fevers, the light that dispels our darkness. "*Strength, says Saint Augustine, is a love that endures everything for those it loves.*"<sup>76</sup>

In everyday life, we experience two types of desire. The first, – emotional desire – is defined by Margareth Arnold as a force that draws us towards what is intuitively valued as good for us here and now or which prompts us to flee from what is intuitively perceived as bad for us here and now. The second, – rational desire – is motivated by the search for and the achievement of good in oneself. But it could happen that what is good for me clashes with the good in itself. A mature person succeeds in making rational desires prevail while allowing the expression of emotions. Didn't Jesus weep at the grave of his friend Lazarus (Jn 11: 35) or sweat blood in the Garden of Gethsemane while doing the Father's will (Lk 22: 44)? A life without emotions would not be a human life. The camera does not marvel at a beautiful landscape while a person's eyes admire a beautiful sunset or contemplate a raging sea. A healthy management of emotions, of which Christ gave us many examples during his public life, constitutes a real strength for those who want to remain firm and constant in the accomplishment of good in itself. Bernard Lonergan rightly asserts: "*Emotions give intentional consciousness its mass, its moment, its energy, its strength. Without them, our decisions would be like a sheet of paper.*"<sup>77</sup> In short, accepting, recognizing and learning to manage one's emotions is to embrace one's authentic humanity.

Jean-Marie de la Mennais conceives of strength as an assumed weakness that is expressed through thoughtfulness. This is what he means when he invites the Brothers to spare the weaknesses of others. Concretely, this consists in avoiding

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<sup>76</sup> Saint Augustin, De moribus Ecclesiae.

<sup>77</sup> Luigi Maria Rulla, Depth psychology and vocation, p. 92.

*"finishing off the already crumpled reed", or "putting out the wick that is still smoking" or "causing the slightest pain to those who do us the most harm". This also means acquiring that maturity which allows us to welcome the grace of belonging to a family "which offers support to our weakness and which surrounds us with barriers to prevent us from turning back and falling".<sup>78</sup> Finally, it commits us to walking on the road to perfection by assuming our weaknesses, by being, in daily life, full of indulgence for our brothers while "valuing ourselves the last and most imperfect of all".<sup>79</sup>*

For each member of the Mennaisian Family to be able to give their full potential, it is essential to develop this spirit of poverty which leads each one to open their hands and their heart to welcome others with their resources and their shortcomings. In so doing, each one will gradually learn to give the best of himself by living according to the logic of love which bears everything for those he loves. Everyone will strive to give priority to the good in themselves over their emotional desires. Everyone will commit to embracing empathy as a lifestyle, avoiding extinguishing the still smoking wick or finishing off the already crumpled reed. Here is a whole life journey for the Mennaisian Family that wishes the power of the Lord to give its full measure in its weaknesses! This is laying hands on others after the example of Jesus and according to the recommendations of Jean-Marie de la Mennais!

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<sup>78</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 636.

<sup>79</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 639.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **DARING TO GO OUT TO THE PERIPHERIES**

Daring to go to the peripheries is the audacious route proposed by the last General Chapter to all the Lay people and Brothers of the Mennaisian Family to live the apostolic dimension of their vocation: to be brothers or sisters of children and young people, especially the poorest. In fact, when the Lord calls someone, he always entrusts him with a mission: to bring the Good News to the poor, to announce release to the captives and recovery of their sight to the blind (Lk 4: 18). Pope Francis reminds us that we are all invited to respond generously to this call to come out of our own comfort to reach the different peripheries that need the light of the Gospel.

Daring to go to the peripheries is to be faithful to our original charism. As the Brothers of Christian Schools had to be at least three in community, and as the rural communes did not have a budget capable of paying three teachers, Jean-Marie opted for the solution of one teaching Brother living with the parish priest. Thus, our charism led us to the peripheries, that is to say, where others did not go, at the service of the poor children of the Breton countryside, the peripheries in those days.

Daring to go to the peripheries, such is the missionary conversion to which we are called. In fact, it is all about making ourselves close to the poor, allowing ourselves to be evangelized by them, discovering Christ in them, listening to them and becoming their friends. In so doing, we practice the preferential

option for the poor. This same conviction was Jean-Marie de la Mennais' when he wrote to Brother Lucien Deniau on May 15, 1849: *"Even if we had lost our case in court, we would not have sent the poor away: they are sacred for us."*

Dare to go to the peripheries means learning to open your heart, ears, eyes and hands to different forms of poverty. The unemployed lack the benefit of work; this goes against their dignity and rights. The sick lack health even if they have a well-stocked bank account. The migrants are deprived of stability: they are looking for an identity, a country, a home. The young or the itinerants long for the affection and warmth of a family, while single persons suffer from the lack of relationships. A young person who fails at school lacks the benefit of success and self-esteem. The child whose parents are divorced requires guidance; he needs attention. The young adult who has never heard of Jesus Christ lacks the wealth of the gospel.

So as to explore this theme, we have to listen to Jesus who did not remain indifferent to the sufferings of the people of his time. The text of Mark on the multiplication of the loaves (Mk 6: 34-44) and on which Jean-Marie de la Mennais relied to define the mission of the Congregation, namely, to give food to children and young people, will serve as guide in our meditation.

## **1- By Another Road**

*"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So, he began teaching them many things. By this time, it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. 'This is a remote place,' they said, 'and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.'" (Mk 5: 34-36)*

In this passage, Mark the evangelist emphasizes Jesus' compassion for a crowd that is like sheep without a shepherd.



Such a spectacle disrupts the Master's program: he wanted to withdraw with his disciples for a well-deserved rest. However, he began to teach them at length. But as it's getting dark, his disciples interrupt him discreetly and ask him to dismiss his listeners.

The situation is serious: "*The place is deserted and already the hour is late*" (Mk 6: 35). People are tired and hungry. Faced with this situation of distress, the disciples propose the most reasonable and convenient solution: that they all go and buy themselves something to eat (Mk 6: 36). But, surprise! Jesus points out "another way". This alternative, the fruit of Jesus' active compassion, is the right answer at the right time because it saves from indifference, individualism and comfort; it invites us to put ourselves at the service of these "*sheep without a shepherd*". It is the same invitation that emerges from the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10: 29-37). Unlike the priest and the Levite who choose to walk by on the other side, the Good Samaritan, seized with compassion, opts for another course of action, that of closeness and benevolence.

In the early Church, following the complaint of Hellenist Christians that their widows were disadvantaged compared to those of Hebrew origin, the response, perhaps not the most obvious, was the institution of deacons whose mission was the service of charity (Acts 6: 1-7). Is not serving the poor prolonging the active compassion of Christ? In the martyrology of Saint Lawrence, it is reported that this deacon, summoned to hand over the goods of the Church of Rome, appears before the tribunal with poor people and declares: "*These are the true treasures of the Church: they never decrease and always increase.*" This is why Saint Teresa of Calcutta liked to say that it is always better to teach someone to fish than to give them a fish every day. It is this other way that Pope Francis describes as "*a love that*

*tastes of compassion and dignity*".<sup>80</sup> Such language is understood by all and makes it possible to show the wounded humanity of today the face of the merciful love of the Father.

Compassion sprouts very early on in the heart of Jean-Marie de la Mennais. As a child, he did not hesitate to look for priests in difficulty to lead them home. In Saint-Brieuc, as vicar capitular, he was deeply moved by the distress of the children of Brittany as Jesus was by the poor and the little ones of his time. Thus, his experience of compassion is at the origin of our Congregation. This is the interpretation that Brother Maurice Chotard gives:

*"When Father Jean-Marie de la Mennais saw idle children running the streets, unsupervised, exposed to all dangers ... he felt compassion for them. But how was he to remedy this evil? There was only one way: to open schools. How, on the other hand, would he find masters, already in poor supply? He would train them. This is what he decided to do in 1817."*<sup>81</sup>

Subsequently, our Founder endeavored to transmit this compassion to his sons and daughters by reminding them that they must be ready to sacrifice everything to come to the aid of children and young people. He exhorted them: *"At the sight of this multitude of children who call on us for help, no human interest will hold us back; we will rush towards them, we will take them in our arms, and we will say to them: Dear children, whom Jesus, our Savior, loved so much, whom he deigned to embrace and bless, come to us, stay with us; we will be the guardian angels of your innocence."*<sup>82</sup>

Initially founded for the Breton countryside, the Congregation extended its missionary field nineteen years later, sending five Brothers to establish a mission in Guadeloupe. This

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<sup>80</sup> Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti, n° 62.

<sup>81</sup> Brother Maurice Chotard, Le Corsaire de Dieu, n° 54.

<sup>82</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 538.

adventure was a concrete response to Admiral Rosamel's touching appeal for slaves in the West Indies. Thus, compassion is not only the cradle where the Congregation was born, but it is also the force which pushed it to go beyond borders to meet geographical and existential peripheries.

Today, only compassion can save the Mennaisian Family from indifference and make it venture to the peripheries. This is the only way if we are to make Jesus Christ known and loved by children and young people. It is the key to help us widen our sphere of influence and reach those who are not immediately targeted, even if they are close to us. Compassion provides the necessary audacity and creativity when implementing voluntary and solidarity projects in favor of the poorest.

## **2- At the Discretion of Providence**

*“But Jesus answered, ‘You give them something to eat.’ They said to him, ‘That would take more than half a year’s wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?’ ” (Mk 6: 37)*

As the Apostles suggest that the crowd be dismissed, Jesus offers a bewildering response. He asks them to feed five thousand men, not counting women and children. But how can the Master suggest that they give what they do not have? At the end of this long day, they too are probably hungry and have nothing. The group bursar must have something in the common purse, but the disciples point out the impossibility of such an expense: *“That would take more than half a year’s wages!”* (Mk 6: 37).

From a human perspective, giving what you do not have is impossible. But in God's logic, everything is possible for those who trust Providence (Lk 1: 37). The Lord himself invites us to trust him: he feeds the birds of the air which neither sow nor reap and he clothes the lily of the field better than Solomon in all his glory. Does he not know our needs even better than we do?

Are we not worth more than the grass of the fields? (Mt 6: 26-34). Daring to go to the peripheries is to risk surrendering to Providence and believing that God always gives us what he asks of us (Lk 9: 1-6). In fact, it means experiencing this existential poverty which consists in receiving everything from him in his own good time. Such is the condition for him to perform wonders for us and through us (Lk 1: 46-56). He provides the bearings to move forward with Him, especially when it is dark and when someone else takes us where we would rather not go (Jn 21: 18).

At the outset, the Church always encouraged Christians to trust God and surrender to his Providence. Why such an exhortation? *“The testimony of Scripture is unanimous: the solicitude of divine Providence is concrete and immediate, it takes care of everything, from the smallest things to the great events of the world and of history.”*<sup>83</sup> This is why Saint Gregory of Nazianze invites his faithful to let themselves be led by the providential love of God because *“he makes his sun rise on the wicked and on the good, and makes his rain fall on the just and the unjust”* (Mt 5: 45). For Saint Paul of Nole, surrender to Providence is the weapon which allows the athlete to run in the stadiums of the world to make Christ known. In his book: *“The City of God”*, Saint Augustine interprets history as a struggle between two loves: love of oneself *“to the point of indifference towards God”*, and love of God *“to the point of indifference to oneself”*.<sup>84</sup> The sign that Christians are coming out victorious in this fight can be seen in their readiness to serve others, especially the poorest.

Saint Teresa of Avila identifies two fruits that those who live according to Providence bear. They are patient: they have learned to wait for the hour of God. Nothing troubles or frightens them: those who have God lack nothing. Pope Francis indicates a

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<sup>83</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, n° 303.

<sup>84</sup> Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV, 28.

third one: hope. This virtue provides the necessary audacity to look beyond personal comfort and prejudices that block the horizon to welcome the surprises of God as did Abraham, Elizabeth and Mary.

Jean-Marie de la Mennais' and Gabriel Deshayes' decision to found our Congregation for the Breton countryside is an act of surrender to Providence. This is Jean-Marie's interpretation forty years later:

*"When I think of this little mustard seed that I threw in the earth forty years ago, without really knowing what would become of it, but in the care of Divine Providence, what comfort it is, after so many years of hard work and hardship, to see our work spread in Brittany, establish itself in the south of France and extend beyond the seas. At this sight, I am mystified and cry out with the Scripture: Yes, the hand of God is there."*<sup>85</sup>

For Jean-Marie de la Mennais, trusting Providence means letting oneself be led by the hand, like a little child, wherever the Lord wants to take you. It means learning to be flexible and docile in his hands. It means throwing oneself with closed eyes in his arms because he never disappoints whoever surrenders to him in all confidence. Thus, when the mission becomes more difficult, when failure looms on the horizon and when contradictions, misunderstandings and disappointments multiply, whoever trusts Providence succeeds in hoping against all hope and walks with God who is always faithful to his promises. *"Hope against all hope is the motto of the children of the Promise, and God, I know, is powerful enough to turn the stones into children of Abraham: so, I do not lose confidence."*<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, Circular Letter for the 1857 Retreat.

<sup>86</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, GC III, 312.

Trusting Providence is the way the Mennaisian Family can dare go to the peripheries. This is the miracle to be welcomed and carried out daily: achieving free self-giving. This is what will enable us to offer what we do not have to those who are hungry and whom we do not want to send away empty-handed. This is the vaccine that will help us develop antibodies against pessimism, the virus that attacks and kills promises of new life.

### **3- In the Footsteps of Missionary Disciples**

*"Jesus asked them: 'How many loaves do you have? Go and see.' When they found out, they said, 'Five - and two fish.'" (Mk 6: 38)*

Mark shows Jesus in consultation with his apostles. The exchange is rather brief. Faced with their embarrassment to answer his question: "*How many loaves of bread do you have?*", the Master makes them a simple proposition: "*Go and see.*" After a quick investigation, they found "*five loaves of bread and two fish*". Clearly insufficient to feed five thousand men!

With the phrase "*Go and see,*" Mark emphasizes the importance of the active participation of the missionary disciple. Indeed, only one who is open and available can set out with others. As regards the recipients of his mission, he welcomes their collaboration and contribution, their "*five loaves of bread*" and their "*two fish*". This active willingness and participation could be compared to the good soil in which the small mustard seed is sown and called to grow and surpass all the other trees (Mt 13, 31-32) or to the pinch of leaven that will raise the whole dough (Lk 13, 20-21). To dare go to the peripheries, following the example of the apostles and at the invitation of the Master, the missionary disciple must be ready to meet those who are willing to make their contribution to the construction of the common house.

The Church, family of God, today as it was yesterday, must be available to serve those who, from the outside, call for help.

Thus, the apostle Peter sets out and meets Cornelius, welcoming his invitation. This spells a Pentecost for the Gentiles. A new phase in the spread of the Gospel opens up (Acts 10: 1-48). Throughout the centuries, willing witnesses sprouted in the life of the Church. Just remember the missionaries who left everything behind to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. In 1547, Saint François Xavier met a Japanese fugitive who wanted to become a Christian. Recognizing a call from God in this person's desire, he decided to travel to Japan to take the gospel there. In 1549, despite the death penalty against anyone who administered baptism, Saint Francis Xavier managed to create a community of around one hundred faithful. After serving as a missionary in Japan, Saint Maximilian Kolbe volunteered to starve to death in the Auschwitz concentration camp instead of a father, Franciszek Gajowniczek. Saint Teresa of Calcutta, a missionary disciple in India, always saw herself as a "*pencil in the hands of God*".

In the words of Benedict XVI, today more than ever, "*our times demand a new readiness to help the neighbor who needs help*".<sup>87</sup> For Pope Francis, the priest, a missionary disciple, is characterized by his availability and readiness at the service of all. In so doing, the Church becomes "*the house with open doors, refuge for sinners, home for those who live in the street, house for the sick, space for young people, catechesis classroom for the children of the first communion*".<sup>88</sup> This road to pastoral conversion allows Christians to live in the synodal mode by contributing who they are and what they have.

Jean-Marie de la Mennais sees availability as first and foremost an interior reality, the prototype of which is the active and welcoming attitude of the shepherds at the news from the Angels. "*Let us go to Bethlehem to see what has happened, the event which the Lord has made known to us*" (Lk 2: 15). In so

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<sup>87</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, n° 30.

<sup>88</sup> Pope Francis, Homily for Holy Thursday, April 17, 2014.

doing, they act as men of good will in offering their presence to the Lord. For our Founder, a Brother is a missionary disciple when he, like the shepherds, strives to "*want what God wants, as he wants it, when he wants it*".<sup>89</sup> Better still, he is fundamentally an envoy of Jesus in the footsteps of the Apostles. Like them, he has nothing, he is nothing. What is weakest is what the Lord chooses and sends into the world to be his witnesses.

The sons and heirs of Jean-Marie de la Mennais have learned availability, this value which makes it possible to be sent out for the mission wherever the Lord sends them. Thus, we can better understand the attitude of the Brothers at the end of the retreat of 1837 when our Founder asked for five volunteers to go to Guadeloupe. Of the sixty Brothers, fifty-two responded favorably.

"*Go and see*" is the invitation that the Lord extends today to the entire Mennaisian Family. Responding to this call with generosity and availability will save us from withdrawing into ourselves, this meanness that kills by asphyxiation. Life belongs to those who dare go out to the peripheries at the invitation of the Master. Fecundity befriends travellers like Abraham and Sarah, like the people of Israel on their way to the promised land, like our missionary Brothers of yesterday and of today.

When we open ourselves to the call of the Lord who sends us, the impossible becomes possible. His grace touches our everyday life and transforms our fears and our limitations into missionary audacity, into a generous response full of fruitfulness for the Mennaisian Family and the Church. It converts our shortcomings into service and dedication, especially for the poorest children and young people. Our joy and our enthusiasm become a call and a challenge for those around us. How responsive are we to the inclination the Lord gives us to dare go out to the peripheries and meet those who can only offer us "*their five loaves*" and "*their two fish*"?

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<sup>89</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 628.



#### 4- At the Service of Fraternity

*"Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So, they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties." (Mk 6: 39-40)*

At the command of Jesus, the Apostles made the crowd sit down. Isn't it a well-deserved rest if they've been up for a long time? The place is nice: "*the grass is green*," says Mark the evangelist. However, one detail should be noted: people group together "*in groups of one hundred and fifty*". Order reigns. Sitting in groups of a hundred and fifty on the green grass implies that everything is ordered at the service of the fraternity.

Mark's allusion to "*green grass*" and specification "*by groups of one hundred and fifty*" refer to the good Shepherd who makes his flock rest on green meadows and leads them to still waters (Ps 22: 1 -2). In fact, the Good Shepherd takes care of his sheep and knows each by name. When the wolf comes, he protects and defends them (Jn 10: 1-17). If one gets lost, he is ready to go look for it. When he finds it, he is so happy that he puts it on his shoulders (Lk 15: 1-7). He is also concerned about the sheep that do not yet belong to his flock and he intends to do everything possible to bring them together in the same fold (Jn 10: 16). In so doing, he is a Pastor who really puts himself at the service of the fraternity.

From the beginning, faithful to the teaching of Christ, the Church has always invited Christians, especially community leaders, to care for those in their charge, following the example of the Good Shepherd. Their mission is to watch with devotion over the flock, not by commanding as masters, but by putting themselves at the service of the fraternity (1 P 5: 2-3). Thus, in a concise formula, Saint Augustine synthesized his understanding of his ministry at the service of the Church of Hippo: "*For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian*". The Rule of Saint Benedict asks the abbot of the monastery to pay special attention to members of the community who are tired. For Saint Gregory the

Great, the good shepherd must be rooted in contemplation. This is the way of welcoming the needs of others into his heart so that they become his own. This allows him to be everything to everyone. Pope Francis concurs when he encourages bishops and priests to be "*pastors living with the smell of the sheep*". But how do you get there? By living in the midst of the flock, joining Christians in their daily life, going to the peripheries of their existence: such is the methodology of the Church to be at the service of fraternity.

From Jean-Marie de la Mennais' point of view, the Brother's mission as shepherd has a double dimension. It is both presence and proximity to children and young people to take care of and protect them: "*We will count one by one these tender sheep that you have placed in our care and we will defend them against the constantly renewed attacks that they are under.*"<sup>90</sup> It is also a preferential option for the most fragile. Thus, "*a Brother is sent, as Jesus Christ himself was, to take in the scattered sheep of the house of Israel.*"<sup>91</sup>

Serving the fraternity like the Good Shepherd means learning to give one's life to take care, protect and defend the smallest and most fragile. It is daring to go in search of those who are far away so as to bring them back to the common home. This is the mission that the General Chapter of 2018 entrusts to the Mennaisian Family when it invites all to venture to the peripheries. No one can save himself alone. Brotherhood is our new frontier, our vaccine against individualism that leaves "*those who are not interesting*"<sup>92</sup> by the wayside.

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<sup>90</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S I, 556.

<sup>91</sup> Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 560.

<sup>92</sup> Simone Weil's expression.

## 5- In Response to Hunger

*“Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, Jesus gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.” (Mk 6: 41-44)*

Mark the evangelist highlights several of Jesus’ actions: he takes the five loaves and two fish, he looks up to heaven, he blesses, he breaks, he gives to the disciples... Jesus gets involved: he responds to our needs. He is not indifferent to our needs.

But what sort of bread does today’s world need? If we refer to the letters that make up that word, the **bread** (in French **pain**) that Jesus would break in 2021 would be called presence (**présence**), love (**amour**), identity (**identité**) and food (**nourriture**).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, loneliness is also taking its toll. On this subject, the testimonies of the elderly and the young speak volumes. Saint Teresa of Calcutta rightly asserted that loneliness is one of the greatest forms of poverty in our world. What if Jesus was counting on us today to break the bread (**Pain**) of **presence** by bonding with those who are encumbered with the burden of isolation and abandonment? Wasn't that what he himself did when he approached and took care of the man left half-dead by the wayside (Lk 10: 25-37)?

When we look at the rise of racism, intolerance, and armed conflicts around the world, how can we not think that all these difficulties stem from a deep lack of **love (Amour)**? Indeed, our hearts have hardened: there is no more room for patience, forgiveness, self-denial, free service, compassion (1 Cor 13: 1-13). Consequently, the greatest danger that threatens us today is deficiency of love. **Love broken and shared** is the only force that

will help us welcome others as brothers or sisters (Mt 23: 8). Our world hungers for this revolution of tenderness which Pope Francis often speaks about.

Today, the number of **identity (Identité)** groups continues to increase in our society, especially among young people. They are going through a **real identity crisis**. Usually, these small groups reside at the peripheries and do not feel recognized or accepted. Thus, those who believe themselves to be the owners of the country, gang up against this common enemy, using the values of living together, customs and religion as a pretext. They often fall into fanaticism by creating for themselves leaders to whom they give the mission to protect them against their own insecurities and internal revolts. When Jesus breaks the bread, he shares with us what he is. He became man so that we could inherit his divinity. The identity that Christ offers, by becoming one of us, is the only one that gives roots to grow, flourish and bear fruit where we are sown. Pope Francis' comment is understandable:

*"It is a terrible alienation for a person to realize that he has no roots and belongs to no one. And there is nothing worse than feeling like a stranger in your own home, without a common identity to share with other human beings. Roots make us less alone and more complete."<sup>93</sup>*

According to a 2018 United Nations report, 821 million people are hungry, and more than 150 million children are stunted due to malnutrition. To respond to this scourge, which is not only a tragedy but a shame, Pope Francis proposes to use some of the money used today for military spending to create a global fund to fight hunger. Obviously, our world is **hungry for food**. Can we remain indifferent to the cries of those who are starving (Mt 25: 35)? Charity urges us on (2 Cor 5: 14). It is a

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<sup>93</sup> Pope Francis, God is Young.

pledge of our faith. Even though we cannot feed three thousand people, let's feed at least one person. This will be our modest contribution in the fight against the scourge of hunger.

To feed those who are hungry today, Jean-Marie de la Mennais recommends attitudes specific to the family or to the profession of baker. When it comes to relieving the burden of loneliness, the Mennaisian educator is that elder brother who, by his presence and closeness, implies that others can count on him to grow and flourish. Faced with a lack of love, he can be a mother who takes care and who, thanks to his/her attention and thoughtfulness, allows others to feel loved the way they are, with their strengths and weaknesses. To respond to the identity crisis that affects so many young people today, he can be a father who gives everyone the security they need to learn to believe in themselves and to develop their potential. In the fight against the scourge of hunger, he is a baker who shows creativity and audacity to respond appropriately to the needs of his community. Such is the example given to us by Brother Zoël who launched a bakery to provide bread to the town of Plouvorn during the famine of 1847. The same Brother in 1851, at the height of a typhoid epidemic, got up at four in the morning to comfort and treat the sick.

Breaking bread is the *raison d'être* of our Congregation. It is an urgent mission nowadays. So as to meet this missionary challenge, the Brothers and the Lay people of the Mennaisian Family are invited to lend each other mutual support. As members of the same body, we are called to be mothers, fathers, brothers or sisters, bakers when it comes to meeting the different needs of the children and young people entrusted to us. This is living more and more "*in a Mennaisian Family Mode*".



## CONCLUSION

A providential nod or wink! Last summer, I decided that the next circular letter would focus on the Mennaisian Family. On December 8, 2020, Pope Francis published the Apostolic Letter "*Patris Corde*" in which he invites the Church to remember the 150th anniversary of the declaration of Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church. Husband of Mary and adoptive father of Jesus, who better than Joseph can take care of the Mennaisian Family, as he once did that of Nazareth!

As he lovingly watched over the growth of Jesus and taught him to walk holding his hand, Joseph is the guide who inspires us, in the storms of life, to leave the rudder of our boat in God's hands. By the example of his obedience, he accompanies us in our following of Christ, even if we have to get up in the night and go where the Lord sends us. By taking Mary into his home without setting any preconditions, he invites us to welcome others without exclusion, the way they are, with a preference for the poorest and most fragile.

When we are faced with danger and difficulties that tend to discourage us, Joseph instills in us the courage and the audacity to assume our responsibilities until the end. Committed as he was to his work to ensure sustenance to his family, he confirms that the Lord is counting on us to continue perfecting the creation of the world around us. Thanks to his discretion, he brings out the beauty of a love that liberates and puts Jesus and Mary at the center.

May Joseph teach us how to make Jesus and Mary the most precious treasure of our life!

## **PRAYER**

Saint Joseph, Spouse of the Virgin Mary and guardian of Jesus, be our Teacher. Show us how to carry out the will of the Lord in the humble daily tasks of our lives. Help us respond to his call with faith and availability. Make us drink from his wellspring so we can flourish where we are planted. Give us confidence when he asks us to reach out to others. Accompany us when he invites us to dare go out to the peripheries. Help us to look to the welfare of those in our care. Show us how to work for the advent of a more beautiful, more just and more fraternal world.

Watch over the Mennaisian Family, as you once did over that of Nazareth.

God alone in time!  
God alone in eternity!

**Amen!**

**Brother Hervé Zamor, s.g.**  
**March 19, 2021**  
**On the solemnity of Saint Joseph.**