

LETTER TO THE MENNAISIAN FAMILY

Dear Lay Mennaisians, Dear Brothers,

Serving the poor!

"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life" (Mk 10:45). To remind us of the centrality of service in the life of the Christian, Mark refers us to Jesus himself who made it the main objective of his incarnation. But whom does he serve first? Those on the periphery, on the margins of society. Indeed, he heals lepers (Lk 17:11-19), he gives sight to the blind (Mk 10:46-52), he feeds the crowds (Jn 6:1-13). He, the Master, washes the feet of his disciples (Jn 13:1-17); he welcomes and blesses children (Mk 10:13-16). How can we, today, Lay Mennaisians and Brothers, put ourselves in his school, following in the footsteps of our Founders: Jean-Marie de la Mennais and Gabriel Deshayes?

Serving the poor is in the DNA of our spiritual family. It is our reason for being. Moved by compassion for the young people of Saint Briec, left to their own fate, who did not go to school and unable to find Christian Brothers to take care of them, Jean-Marie de la Mennais decided to found an institute of religious educators whose mission was to *"provide the children of the people, especially those of rural Brittany, with solidly pious teachers"*¹. Faithful to his intuition, the *"first Little Brothers"* lived in poverty, sometimes lacking the bare necessities. Confronted with administrative difficulties regarding the subsidies granted to his schools, our Founder pointed out to the authorities that their suppression or reduction threatened the very existence of his establishments, especially those in the smallest and poorest communes, which he had had in mind mainly when he founded his Institute (GC VII, 171). To certain Mayors of these communes, he reminded them that his institutions welcomed all the needy children who presented themselves free of charge. To Brother Lucien, who was worried about the forthcoming closure of his school, he reaffirmed his preferential option for the most disadvantaged: *"Even if we had lost our case, we would not have sent the poor away: they are sacred to us"* (GC VI, 169). To the Brothers, he recommends that they pay special attention to the least virtuous and most difficult pupils. To those who were leaving for Guadeloupe and Martinique, he advised them to always treat the slaves with great kindness.

Today, how can we be faithful to such a heritage? To continue to serve the poor, Jean-Marie de la Mennais proposes the following methodology:

- **the formation of "teachers of solid piety":** For our Founder, being well rooted in God alone is the surest way to become a servant following the example of Jesus, who went-by doing good, teaching the poor, enlightening the blind, straightening the lame and healing the sick (Lk 4:18). But how can we make Jesus Christ known and loved, the first of the works of charity, without having met him for a long time in personal prayer and in his Word? This is the example left to us by Saint Teresa of Calcutta, the Foundress of the Missionaries of Charity, who always began her day with an hour of prayer before setting out to serve the poor. This is the path that every disciple of Christ must take if he or she wants to serve like the Master and grow every day in concrete love of neighbour. Without this, it will be impossible for us to recognise and love Him in the most difficult and least virtuous pupil.

¹ Treaty of Union, signed on June 6, 1819.



- **sharing:** By his incarnation, Jesus shares in our humanity in all things, except sin (Heb 4:15). The educator who seeks to put himself at the service of the most disadvantaged is called to be very close to them to the point of identifying with them. This is the life witness of Father Damien de Veuster, the apostle of the lepers. Indeed, with generosity and availability, he answered the call to go to the island of Molokai, which had become a ghetto accessible only to lepers, to live and die with them. Indeed, there he also caught leprosy, a sign of total sharing with his brothers and sisters for whom he gave his life. There is no better way to serve poor children and young people than to live in turn the mystery of the incarnation, made up of cordial closeness and total self-giving!
- **prophecy:** In fact, the prophet is the one who lends his voice to those who do not have or no longer have the strength to make themselves heard in order to defend or protect their rights. This is what Jean-Marie de la Mennais expects of us when he asks us to be guardian angels of children and young people. In the manner of Jesus, we are called to devote ourselves to their service, ready to give our lives, if necessary, to save them. This is the meaning that Henri de Vergès, a Marist Brother, martyred in Algeria, tried to give to his mission as an educator when he was teaching mathematics to his pupils in Sour-El-Ghozlane. Here is an extract from his retreat notes: *"Particular effort this year for special attention to the most disadvantaged among the pupils. From the beginning, to know everyone by name... To better adapt my teaching especially to the most disadvantaged"*. Are we ready to assume our prophetic responsibility towards the most fragile in our care? To renounce it is to be unfaithful to our vocation as Mennaisian educators.
- **free service:** Free service to children and young people living in poverty can offer them the bread of tenderness they so desperately need to grow and reach fulfilment. In doing so, they will discover that they are loved and helped for who they are and that they have value in their own eyes. Gradually, they will learn to fish instead of waiting to be offered a fish every day. This is the type of educational companionship that St. John Bosco proposed to his disciples, consisting of helping each child and each young person, through considerate love, to discover and make the treasure that is hidden within them bear fruit. Is this not the right pedagogy to educate those entrusted to us to gratitude, the path par excellence for them to become in turn servants of the poorest?
- **kindness:** This quality is associated with the values of friendliness, respect, welcome, gentleness and dedication. When a child or young person meets an educator who possesses such assets, his or her life has a different flavour. Thus, they gradually manage to appropriate them by osmosis, by attraction, by admiration and by contagion. Is it not this example of an educator that *Brother Hyacinthe Fichoux* left us and which led to his being called "*the Saint of Basse-Terre*"? Even today, our educational centres are waiting for many other "*Brother Hyacinthe*". What if we were to commit ourselves to promoting his pedagogical method?

Prayer: Lord, open our eyes: that we may recognise you in children and young people, especially the poorest, who are waiting for us to speak to them in a way that makes them stand upright, that comforts them, that restores their confidence and makes them feel good. Open our ears: that we may hear their calls for bread. Open our hearts: that we may love them as you love them. Open our hands: that we serve them with kindness and gratuitousness and share with them what we have and what we are.

God alone in time! God alone in eternity! Amen!

