

LETTER TO THE MENNAISIAN FAMILY

At the service of fraternity!

Dear Lay Mennaisians, Dear Brothers,

The last General Chapter invited the entire Mennaisian Family to place itself at the service of fraternity. How can we respond to this call? "More than just doing, it is a way of being, that is manifested in a fraternal presence" (GC 2018, no. 1). And this is possible whatever be our age, our state of life and our work. Isn't living fraternity our vocation and our mission?

The COVID-19 pandemic made us more aware of the importance of relationships on the one hand and the fragility of fraternity on the other. Indeed, many people suffered from confinement because of the lack of human contact, while conflicts also quickly emerged when families had to learn to live together in a limited space for weeks or even months. And why does fraternity sometimes tend to lead to rivalry? Is this not what Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1-17), Jacob and Esau (Gen 25:21-35), Joseph and his brothers (Gen 37:1-35) had experienced in their interpersonal relationships? It would not be difficult to arrive at the same conclusion if we looked carefully at the experience of our communities, our families, our neighbourhood, our Church. The challenge of living together as brothers and sisters is more real than ever. The latest encyclical of Pope Francis: "*Fratelli Tutti*" is there to remind us. How could it be otherwise? For "*fraternity is built where there is a father figure*"¹. Our modern times is suffering from a real fatherhood crisis.

Faced with this important challenge, the Mennaisian Family cannot remain indifferent. In fact, by its very nature, the Mennaisian charism has a structuring force that gives form to the living together of the fraternity. In other words, it transmits to us a way of being brother or sister. Concretely, what does this mean?

- In the classroom, in the school, in the family, in the place of mission, the Mennaisian is the brother or a sister who pays attention, who encourages, who cares. His/her relationships are marked by love, communion, mutual aid and closeness. Such was the experience of Jean-Marie de la Mennais when he was a young teacher at the College of Saint-Malo: "The most intimate union reigns among the teachers of the College of St Malo. They love each other, they help each other, they follow the same method and they are animated by the same spirit. This perfect harmony is our wealth". The educational community of Saint Malo did not only transmit knowledge, but above all a knowledge of how-to-be, and how-to-relate, in the colours of fraternity.

This fraternal style is learned in the school of Jesus, the firstborn of many brothers (Rom 8:29). What does he teach us? He emptied himself, taking on the condition of a servant and becoming like us (Phil 2:7). He washed the feet of his disciples (Jn 13:5). For Jean-Marie de la Mennais, humility is the virtue that makes us more like Jesus, our Brother: it allows us to weave bonds of fraternity with those in our care or around us. It opens our heart to welcome the other as a brother or sister. It is a grace to be asked for and received on our knees. No one chooses his or her parents or brothers and sisters.

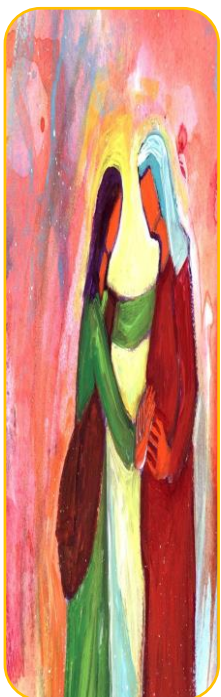
- In the classroom, in the school, in the family, in his/her place of mission, the Mennaisian is **this gentle, patient and good father**. "*With children,*" Jean-Marie de la Mennais recommended to Brother Liguori-Marie Langlumé, "*be good, patient and gentle... You will correct the defects of these children much better by making them love you than by making them fear you*"². Gentleness, patience and goodness are therefore three beatitudes that help the Mennaisian to place himself/herself at the service of fraternity. In so doing, he learns to walk at the pace of his fellow travellers.

St Joseph is the one who can accompany us on the path of gentleness, patience and goodness. "*One never perceives in this man,*" Pope Francis remarks, "*frustration, but only trust. His persistent silence contains no complaints but always gestures of trust*"³. The world today is in

¹ Paola Magna, Costruire relazioni fraterne, La fraternità come benedizione, Tredimensioni 18 (2021), p. 143.

² Letter of Jean-Marie de la Marie, Brother Liguori-Marie Langlumé, 8 October 1845.

³ Pope Francis, Patris Corde, n° 7.





great need of these fathers who point to the heavenly Father, who "*makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain to the just and on the unjust*" (Mt 5:45). Thus, the Congregation has always encouraged its members to take St. Joseph as a model in their educational mission.

- In the classroom, in the school, in the family, in the place of mission, the Mennaisian is that **benevolent, delicate and discreet presence**. He/she knows how to be close, how to be simply there to reassure the other when he or she has to take a new step, how to listen. He/she is also called to be a present, a gift for each person. As Jean-Marie de La Mennais would say, **a guardian angel**, a star from on High, who visits and accompanies the brother or sister whom the Lord has entrusted to him or her.



Only this angel-like presence will help us to come out of ourselves to go towards the other and give him or her first place (Mt 18:1-5). Unlike Cain who asks God if he is his brother's keeper, Abel (Gn 4:9), the Mennaisian is ready to take in his/her arms, protect and serve all those who ask for his/her help. No human interest will hold him/her back. This is the fundamental mission that Jean-Marie entrusted to his Brothers: to be the guardian angels of the children and youth⁴ on their journey of fraternity.

- In the classroom, in the school, in the family, in the place of mission, the Mennaisian is that mother who has the capacity to put herself in the shoes of her child to experience with him/her the joys, sorrows, difficulties, and blockages. This pedagogy of the heart teaches us to love and save young people while respecting their dignity and their fragility.

Who better than Mary can teach us to develop this merciful heart that knows how to care for fraternal charity with the perfume of gentleness and the oil of tenderness?⁵ She is the gentle and maternal hand that comforts, that smoothly heals and educates us to be attentive to others. She is the attentive and discreet ear that teaches us to be more of a brother of Christ and of our neighbour.

- In the classroom, in the school, in the family, in the place of mission, the Mennaisian is the **Good Shepherd** who takes care of his sheep and knows each one by name. When the wolf comes, he protects and defends them (Jn 10:1-17). If one of them goes astray, he is ready to go looking for it. When he finds it, he takes it on his shoulders, joyfully (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 gather them into the same fold (Jn 10:16). In so doing, he/she is the Shepherd who truly puts himself/herself at the service of fraternity. Opening the synod, Pope Francis, himself the Shepherd, invites us to meet and listen to all our brothers and sisters in order to live a beautiful experience of fraternity in synodality.



It is this community of good shepherds that Jean-Marie de la Mennais and Gabriel Deshayes wanted when they founded our Congregation. This is what can be seen in the Treaty of Union, signed on June 6, 1819, at Saint-Brieuc, where they committed themselves to pooling their energies to "*provide the children of the people, especially those of the Breton countryside, with teacher of solid piety*". What a magnificent parable of fraternity our two Founders have left us! A heritage to be made to bear fruit and to be passed on, in Mennaisian Family mode!

Brother Hervé Zamor, Superior General

⁴ Jean-Marie de la Mennais, S II, 538.

⁵ Letter of Jean-Marie de la Mennais, Brother Arthur, 23 November 1846.