

DO YOU LOVE ME?

*Meditation
in an Apostle's Life*

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Cover Page.

In this passage taken from “Christ outraged” by Fra Angelico, Saint Dominic is represented in an attitude of intense and peaceful listening to the Word. He is scrutinizing and questioning the book. He is turning the pages under the Spirit’s guidance, represented by the star over his head, in order to better discern the Way, the Truth and the Life.

“One should often think of God while conversing with men, and recollect oneself in order to pray in secret, without constraint or painful effort, but with great loving simplicity.”
(John-Mary de la Mennais, M. 18)

INTRODUCTION

The document of the 2012 General Chapter invites us from the very first pages to be disciples and apostles, to become aware that we cannot evangelise if we are not ourselves evangelised. A further survey of the texts reveals the various domains concerned with our mission of evangelisation. We are challenged by the evangelising and Mennaisian nature of our educational mission, by the evangelising nature of our relationships with the youth, by our brotherly interdependence with the poor. These are followed by the formation journeys which make possible our being both disciples and apostles of Christ.

All of these texts answer one fundamental question: Is He who called us, and whom we have chosen to follow in the generous thrust of our youth, still the same one we follow as disciples of the Gospel? Is He the one whose word we are still listening to with a burning heart? Is He the one whom we are proclaiming? The current and future dynamism of our

Congregation depends, without any doubt, on the answers to these questions.

Peter, though weak and sinful, but passionate and hot-headed, invites us, in some ways, to undergo the same experience he lived.

*So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter,
"Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?"
He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You."
He said to him, "Tend My lambs."
He said to him again a second time,
"Simon, son of John, do you love Me?"
He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You."
He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep."
He said to him the third time,
"Simon, son of John, do you love Me?"
Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep."*

I ardently wish for each reader of this circular letter to hear anew Jesus' question: "Do you love me?" Jesus' insistence with his triple request may very well be intended for each one of us personally. Each one of us must then wonder seriously about the truthfulness of his answer: *"Do I really love Jesus?"*

I simply wish to propose to each and everyone to gaze personally on his life of prayer and to help him observe what the Holy Spirit accomplishes in him by means of his daily meditation. I invite him on a journey through faith which will allow him to contemplate the mystery of his life as a child of God.

Numerous books broach the issues of methods and of personal journeys through prayer. Our contemporaries seek assistance on how to pray. We ourselves have circular letters

that have been written on that theme by previous Superiors General¹ which we can refer to if we so wish. I therefore do not claim to have truly new things to say herein. My only wish is to invite each Brother to consider the intensity of the love which binds him to Jesus and the manner in which he commits himself to this special place of spiritual discernment which is prayer, especially the morning meditation.

Believers, according to saint Augustine, “grow stronger through believing”, as Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in his apostolic letter *Porta fidei*. Similarly, we could say that they grow stronger through prayer since, above all else, prayer is the basic practice of the believer or, rather, of the believer whose faith is weak but who trusts in the Lord, saying: "I do believe; help my unbelief."

Far from writing a treatise on prayer, I propose a meditation in four parts. We will begin with contemplating the beauty of our baptismal consecration. Baptism is the door to faith and, therefore, to prayer. We will then attempt to come to the conviction, if need be, of the necessity of meditation in our apostolic life. A third part will look at the fundamental attitudes which allow a praying person to grow in the Spirit. We will conclude with reflections on the growth of the spiritual life which the journeys that our life of prayer leads us through.

¹ CF for instance : Circular letters 272, 273, 276 from Br. Bernard Gaudeul, 298 from Br Jose Antonio Obeso

In his book "Aimer Jésus" (Mame-Desclée, coll. Jésus et Jésus-Christ, n° 24, p. 11), **Karl Rahner** gives us judicious advice on the way to make a « spiritual reading ».

"A reading which limits itself to a rapid survey is of no use. We can read sentences at such speed that we have the impression to know the words that have been read, to understand fairly clearly the relationships that have been established and the ideas that have been set forth. But one can read differently: words are then invitations to draw us within, like a lived experience, toward which they direct us [...] Only those who repeat slowly and patiently their life experiences in their reading can effectively understand the words, carefully listening to them within one's own life, in a contemplative attitude comparable with one of openness, like clear water swelling from the depths and pouring in a basin from all sides. Such reading, twinned with a rereading of one's life experiences, does not require from words mathematical exactness. Words can be improved or amended... But they would purely and simply be inaccurate if the reader could not receive them in a silent loving attitude which amends and improves them, and if he did not translate them in the language which is that of his own life".

I

BAPTISM, A DOOR TO PRAYER

We can reread the wonderful second chapter of our Directory where the depth and the beauty of our religious consecration are recalled. There, the Brother is seen as the believer who “ardently desires” that the baptismal consecration, “find fulfilment in an abundance of the fruits of the Holy Spirit”. (D 21)

What has become for us that “original consecration”? It is within us like the seed of the parable that the gardener has sown in his field. *“And He was saying, ‘The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows – how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.’”* (Mk 4, 26-29) And so, the grace of baptism took root and grew in us whether we received it as children, at our parents’ request, or whether we wished to receive it ourselves in adulthood. Since then, the grace of

baptism develops in us as a life that flourishes and grows stronger. It produces fruits that are barely discernible to our bodily eyes. They are, in us, the concrete acts, imperceptible but effective, of the Holy Spirit. The baptismal consecration makes sons of us. It is therefore lived at the heart of the prodigious relationship which God our Father invites us to have with Him. We are his children. His life blossoms in our beings like branches filled with the sap of freedom and of joy that only God can give. We are "deified", bearers of the divine life that we received and that we must convey to our brothers. Our personal identity is not lost in a great Being where it would dissolve: we are introduced into a loving dialogue where our triune God communicates to us his all-powerful fertility.

In this attempt to better enter into the mystery of baptism, we'll meet the mystery of prayer, a privileged place of encounter with the Father, in Christ, through the Spirit. This sacrament has transformed the very depths of our being to make us close friends of the Lord, and even his own children. In the dynamics of the baptismal grace, our religious consecration, by which "the seed of baptism develops to the greatest possible degree" (D 21), opens our heart and mind to true prayer which is an offering of ourselves in praise to the triune God.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church invites us to read some of the fundamental texts about baptism. I shall focus on a text of Saint Gregory of Naziansus²:

"Baptism is God's most beautiful and magnificent gift.... We call it gift, grace, anointing, enlightenment, garment of immortality, bath of rebirth, seal, and most precious gift."

² Catechism of the Catholic Church, n° 1216

I would like to comment on each of these words in turn because they can help us understand what true prayer is, the prayer of *"the Spirit who hovered over the waters so that they receive the force that sanctifies"* as the blessing of the baptismal water at the Easter Vigil puts it. The Spirit that makes us sons is the one who prays in us and shouts: "Abba", Father (cf. Gal 4: 6).

– ***"Baptism is called gift because it is conferred on those who bring nothing of their own,"*** writes Gregory of Nazianzus. What can we give that we haven't received. God comes to us with open arms and hands filled with his Life which he pours abundantly upon us. He Himself is Life given, shared Life through Love in the mystery of the Trinity. We are introduced in this grand movement of the Trinitarian Love, nothing less! It is a free gift the wealth of which we will never grasp. *"If you only knew the gift of God,"* (Jn 4, 10) says Jesus to the Samaritan woman. If we knew the Gift that we have received, which has sprouted and given fruit and has become a fine tree, that Gift through which God offers Himself!

This Gift is not a thing, it is not something that we can accept as a toy and then discard it. This Gift is God. Would we somehow be the ungrateful son who did not grasp the beauty of the gift and who ran away with his fortune to waste it with idols? If, unfortunately, we left and abandoned the splendid mansions of the Father, seduced for a time by the deceitful beauty of the Evil One or grew tired of being a faithful and humble child of the Father, have we at least begun our return home? It is through our continued prayer and humble confidence that we can become aware of the state of our heart as sons.

We who have brought Him nothing have received Him. Everything that is His is ours! Shouldn't we, in turn, tell Him that all that is ours is His? For prayer to be true and reach the depth

of our being, it should carry with it the total gift of self. In the image of the Trinity where the three persons give themselves wholly in Love, the “baptismal vocation” consists in the total surrender of self without self-seeking or self-glorification for the fruits which the baptised offer to the world. Thus, prayer undergoes purifications, “nights” which liberate within us a life potential, the wealth of which we can only guess at.

The Father who loves us has given us his only Son. This Gift has transformed us into children of the Father. The true relationship which we have with Him is a loving exchange where we give what we have received from Him. The Eucharist makes possible this full relationship in which we participate only to the extent that we willingly follow Christ on the cross, in total self-giving. Baptism is the most marvellous Gift that makes us Christ-like, in the image of the most perfect Man. Our prayer is then Christ’s own and becomes, in Him, the gift of self to God for the salvation of our brothers.

– *“Baptism is grace since it is given even to the guilty,”* writes Saint Gregory of Naziansus. In fact, the Church teaches us that through the grace of baptism, evil has left us, darkness has made way for an ineffable light, hate has been thrown out by love. We were sinners, we have been forgiven. We were condemned to death, God restores us to life. And yet, we remain free to go back to darkness and division. Prayer is that accomplishment which forces our poor, all-too-grasping hands to open up. Praying with the Church in community, whether in silence or in the liturgy, opens up our heart when sin had secured its access. We shall see how it is not really possible to pray in truth if our heart is locked in sin, if it is divided, if it does not humble itself at the feet of Jesus, shedding tears of

repentance and of joy while wiping his feet as did the loving sinful woman.

“Dishonest compromise prevents true prayer. We must get rid of it. True prayer implies that we are willing to do the will of God fully and completely,” says a spiritual author.

– *“Baptism is an anointing for it is priestly and royal as are those who are anointed.”* We are consecrated, “anointed” of the Holy Spirit, set apart to sing the praise of the Father. “Set apart”, that is, belonging to God. Such is the fundamental identity of the baptised: he is a member of the people won over by God. As a member of that people, he is priest, prophet and king. In this world, he is a sign of the glory of God, he presents his brothers and sisters to God, he reigns through the love that comes from God. The whole of our being thus becomes prayer, song of praise to God, thanksgiving, supplication for our brothers, prophecy through the action of the Spirit. The prayer that withdraws us upon ourselves cannot be a Christian prayer. Prayer is this place in our heart that reaches out to the Church and the world. We are never alone when we pray. The people of God, Body of Christ, dwells in us. The soul that prays is like that tent which the Spirit calls upon us to expand in order to house all his children (cf. Is 54, 2).

“Thereafter, the Brother belongs to God in a new way, as a living parable of the love relationship between God and regenerated mankind: “I will espouse you to me forever... I will espouse you in fidelity.” (D 24) Father de la Mennais shared his amazement with his children: *“If baptism operates such wonders in us, if the Father adopts us as his sons in Jesus Christ, is it not so that we may worship him in spirit and in truth and that all our thoughts be for his glory ‘for such are the worshippers who seek the Father’?”* (S II, 613) True prayer is an anointment that wraps

us up, a perfume of joy and of love poured over our soul and that attracts around us other children of the same Father.

– ***“Baptism is enlightenment because it radiates light,”*** adds Saint Gregory of Naziansus. The Spirit enlightens the believer's heart wrapped up in the love of the Father, as Jesus' words have enlightened the darkened intellect of the Samaritan woman thirsty for love. The encounter with Jesus in the depths of our being is a bright light, not like our lamps that are so dull, but in keeping with the mystery of faith that lights the night of the heart. *“I know a spring that gushes forth and flows, but it is in the dead of night ... Never will its brilliance darken. All light also springs from it, but it is in the dead of night,”* wrote John of the Cross. The interior illumination of the Christian that the sacrament of baptism brings is, by faith, a strong and gentle light on the path of life. He who walks in faith allows himself to be moved by the splendour of the beautiful countenance of Jesus met in his brothers, especially in the eyes of the poorest of them. Our enlightened mind is then able to discern the beauty of Jesus in their broken faces.

Faith sheds light on the shadows of our intelligence which by itself cannot understand the “thoughts of the Lord”. This illumination of the mind comes effortlessly and gives a peace that nothing can equal. It helps to understand what our intelligence, left to itself, cannot grasp where the divine life within us is concerned. Today, in a catechumenal process, adults and young people receive that gift. They are given to understand in an instant what previously was totally foreign to them. They have been transformed by the grace of baptism received in faith, listening to what can only be perceived in silence. Some Brothers have lived that experience. The eyes that have been enlightened by the Spirit and touched by Him become in turn a

light for the world. There is so much to discover about this living Presence of God within us, such a wonderful mystery. As we shall see later, this grace will grow in us if we wish for its growth with humility and in poverty. It will fade and lose its strength if we let ourselves be fooled by the "idols" of money and power.

– ***“Baptism is a garment since it veils our shame,”*** adds Gregory of Naziansus. In so doing, we have “put on Christ” (Ga 3, 27). We are his children; we have become “sharers in his divine nature” (2 P 1, 4), members of the Body of Christ which is the Church, “living stones” for “the building of a spiritual house” (1 P 2, 5). The white dress which the baptised puts on is that of the new man whom he has become in Christ. Father de la Mennais continues his teaching to the children: *“If the Son receives us in his mystical body, it is not so that we may have life and complete what is missing to his passion...? Do you love all that Jesus Christ has loved? Do you condemn all that he condemns? Do you reject all that he rejects? Are you led by the spirit of God or the spirit of the world?”* (S II 613) Elsewhere, he says: *“When God says he wants our sanctification, it is as if he were saying that he wishes... that we... put on Jesus Christ, in the words of the Apostle, ... that we be his living image!”* (S VIII 2469-2471).

Some hear the call to live this likeness to Jesus through the form of life that was his on the roads of Palestine. Brothers *“sense the need to respond by unconditionally dedicating [their] life to God, consecrating to him all things present and future, and placing them in his hands.”* (VC 17) With Paul, they exclaim: *“I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”* (Gal. 2, 20) This is the true prayer of one who stands before the Father: *“Here I am to do your will.”* This is the eternal prayer of the Son. It is the prayer of Mary at the Annunciation: *“Here I am, I am the handmaiden of the Lord, be it done unto me according to your*

word!" (Lk 1, 38) We must make it wholeheartedly our own so that crucified with Christ we may be risen with Him. Truly, *"called to contemplate and bear witness to the transfigured face of Christ, consecrated men and women are also called to a "transfigured" existence."* (VC 35)

– *"Baptism is a seal as it is our guard and the sign of God's Lordship,"* further points out Gregory of Naziansus. As we know, Vatican II has placed a new emphasis on the *"the sacred nature and organic structure of the priestly community"* (LG 11) made up of those who have received the sacraments of Christian initiation. *"The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood... Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God."* (LG 10) As was previously said, we belong to the Lord, we are his people for the praise of his glory. This is why the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* insists on the importance of the Eucharist and of the liturgy of the hours for the religious. If all the baptised, through the sacred seal that has marked them, are called upon to live the paschal mystery of Christ through their union with Him in his offering to the Father, those who have been called *"to choose Christ as the only meaning of their lives"* must *"desire to establish an ever more profound communion with him by sharing daily in the Sacrament which makes him present"* (VC 95). The Eucharist, in close connection with the liturgy of the hours, *"expresses the call proper to consecrated persons to raise their hearts in praise and intercession."* (VC 95) As such, we are the signs of *"God's Lordship"*. This is our identity. Our being is no longer an expression of our self. It speaks of God. It is, through its calling, an expression of the eternal Word. Through baptism, which our religious consecration wishes to bring to its fulfilment, we

cannot speak of our personal and community prayer without making it part of the immense prayer of the Church since we are members of a priestly people. We can only speak well of Christ as truly and faithful members of a people consecrated to the praise and the glory of God.

This completes the contemplation of the mystery of Baptism. You must have understood that it was not my intention to go back over all dimensions of that founding sacrament. The aim was rather to bring to the memory of our heart that which can give rise in us to an "awakening" of the fundamental dimension of our vocation that closely links, at the heart of the Church, the gift of our life for the world and the glory of our Father, in Jesus, through the Spirit. A Brother's prayer is part of the fundamental consecration of his baptism which is further developed in the religious consecration. Through this consecration, he belongs wholly to God, he is a "man of God": God took possession of him and he possesses the living Christ in the close likeness of whom he wants to be. With Christ, he proclaims the Good News of salvation, heals the sick, gives sight to the blind and praises his Father in heaven.

We therefore conclude this first chapter by reaffirming this belief: prayer and the apostolic action of a Brother are two dimensions that are absolutely inseparable. These two facets of our lives can only grow together. However, prayer demands from us special attention if we are to respond to our vocation as disciples chosen to be sent as apostles. In the pages that follow, we will endeavour to show that this prayer, like a living plant, must grow and ripen to become fruitful. For, if prayer loses its inner flame, our apostolic action is deprived of its strength and fertility. We must seek to "become" what we are: beloved children of the Father.

VATICAN II

The Religious State in the Church

"The faithful of Christ bind themselves to the three aforesaid counsels either by vows, or by other sacred bonds, which are like vows in their purpose. By such a bond, a person is totally dedicated to God, loved beyond all things. In this way, that person is ordained to the honour and service of God under a new and special title.

Indeed through Baptism a person dies to sin and is consecrated to God. However, in order that he may be capable of deriving more abundant fruit from this baptismal grace, he intends, by the profession of the evangelical counsels in the Church, to free himself from those obstacles, which might draw him away from the fervour of charity and the perfection of divine worship. By his profession of the evangelical counsels, then, he is more intimately consecrated to divine service. This consecration will be the more perfect, in as much as the indissoluble bond of the union of Christ and His bride, the Church, is represented by firm and more stable bonds.

...The profession of the evangelical counsels, then, appears as a sign which can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfillment of the duties of their Christian vocation.

... Christ proposed to His disciples this form of life, which He, as the Son of God, accepted in entering this world to do the will of the Father. This same state of life is accurately exemplified and perpetually made present in the Church."

(Lumen Gentium, 44)

A MIRROR TO MY LIFE

What have I discovered in these pages that I must further understand in order to better live by it?

What does the baptismal consecration mean to me?

How does my vocation to the brotherhood help me be more radically a child of the Father?

When I speak about baptism to children, what do I wish them to discover?

II

PRAYER AT THE HEART OF OUR APOSTOLIC SPIRITUALITY

To go further, it is important to ask: What can we say of our spirituality? Can we give an account of what God accomplishes in us since we started to follow Him in the consecrated life? More specifically, how does our apostolic life find its inspiration in prayer? What can we say about our personal relationship to God? What has changed in us and what are the calls that we feel?

Everyone needs to examine himself regularly, especially during the annual retreat. Indeed, we are sometimes tempted to give prayer, and thus our spiritual life, the second place. We often run the risk of being overwhelmed by the incessant flow of daily demands, and little by little, without realizing it, we lose the inner breath that must give life to any apostolic life.

PRAYER AND ASCESIS

*“Every form of action, even apostolic action, is an affirmation of self. On the other hand, prayer is a letting go before God... Much courage is needed to give preference to a hidden life of faith over the attractions of outward success”*³. If the daily exercise of our mission prevents us from entering fully and peacefully into a heart-to-heart with God, be it at prayer time or as the hours of the days and nights go by, we must take stock where our spiritual life stands, for it must become within us a vital force and the cement that binds all the building blocks of our being and of our life. *“Jesus himself gave us the perfect example of how we can link communion with the Father to an intensely active life. Without a constant search for this unity, the danger of an interior breakdown, of confusion and discouragement, lurks always near. Today as yesterday, the close union between contemplation and action will allow the most difficult missions to be undertaken.”* (VC 74)

The Rule of Life reminds us that this unity of life can be acquired through a form of ascesis lived with wisdom and a strong will: *“Ascesis leads to an ongoing conversion of the heart. It frees the Brother from the obstacles which prevent him from hearing the voice of God within him. To the extent that he strives toward that liberation, the Brother is prepared for intimate union with his Lord and for generous dedication to others.”* (D 96) It is not a question of obeying rules imposed from the outside: they cannot change a heart that faith has deserted. But, by adopting rules of life that promote a spirit of prayer, we foster the emergence of the fruits of the Spirit and we help give a greater spiritual vitality to our religious family. *“The growth of the spirit of prayer requires... Christian ascesis and interior*

³ Charles-André Bernard, s.j. in *Dictionnaire de la Vie spirituelle*, p. 64

silence to control the vagaries of the imagination and of the emotions... The Brother centres his life on God, who calls him to walk in his presence in peace of soul, the fruit of single-hearted love." (D 79)

It is up to each one to see what issues he should pay closer attention to. To mention only one, that of punctuality at morning prayer in order to be with our Brothers for the prayer of Lauds and meditation. Let us admit that it is really impossible to progress in spiritual life without this first demanding condition. Let us, however, consider another aspect which is closely related to it: the inner silence that gives us mastery over our eyes and our thoughts. A journalist recently shared his own experience in this field. After having been shaken up internally by a "Silent Presence" that imposed itself on him, he looked back on his life and narrated, in a recent book, his long and slow discovery of the grace of silence. He talks about this silent presence as the "sacrament" of a relationship to a living person: *"Since then, she never leaves me. I have an irrepressible desire for her, and her alone, to welcome the birth of each new day. She accompanies my rising, my washing, preparing breakfast ... For thirty years, I had the morning reflex of any "normal" journalist: to turn on the radio ... Since my amazing adventure ... I have forgotten how to turn the knob of my radio. When I wake up, I let myself be swept up, collected by the silence of this secret and discreet Presence: she invites me, before all else, to have a heart-to-heart with her for the salvation of the world"*⁴ We should carefully examine our lives: Is it not this silent presence in the depths of our being that we need most. Indeed, that

⁴ Michel Cool, *Conversion au silence*, Salvator, 2012, p. 13

presence will enable us to draw from the depth of our wells the living water of love and "to receive ourselves from God"⁵.

TO LOVE

"One should often think of God while conversing with men, and recollect oneself in order to pray in secret, without constraint or painful effort, but with great loving simplicity." (M. 18) If the encounter with the Lord demands of us a few elementary ascetic practices, John Mary de la Mennais reminds us that our relationship with the Lord is fundamentally a relationship of love. To follow the Lord means choosing the "narrow" way of love. It is indeed the way of the cross, but followed out of love. It can only be climbed in love and peace.

Entering into prayer is like coming into our own in a simple and peaceful movement, paying attention, without inner tension, to the Love that expresses itself in us in the form of thanksgiving and offering of self. The thought that rises to God finds no place in a heart that is "tense" or "stressed out", but only in a loving heart. It can only arise from a will purified of self and open to the Other. It is a prayer that opens the eyes and does not judge, a thrust toward God, born in a heart that offers itself.

Father de la Mennais has yet other weighty words: *"One should take care not to lose this freedom of spirit, this amiable and sweet freedom of the children of God without which no good can be done. To preserve it, an intimate union with God is necessary so as to walk in His presence with a heart where peace*

⁵ A reference to the title given by Brother Josu Olabarrieta to the first number of the La Mennais Études.

reigns." (M. 16-17) No one can attain this intimate relationship with God without a peaceful heart. One who is concerned about his self-image, who is annoyed by the attitudes of his Brothers whom he can hardly tolerate or who cannot hear or see what wonders happen around him, can in no way be open to the prayer of the Spirit. Only he for whom "all is grace" can pray in secret. Bad news are not his daily fare and he is not outwitted by "tittle-tattle" and "gossip" and "rumours". On the contrary, for him "all is grace".

A true apostolic spirituality feeds on daily love for one's brother. Let us again recall this word of our Founder: *"Let us pray, indeed let us pray always. But, one might say, is this possible?"* And he continues: *"You ask how one can always pray? Why don't you ask how one can love always, for prayer is love, and only love, and love is the most beautiful and the most perfect of prayers."* (S IV, 1478) It is both simple and demanding. And yet, can we claim that everything that we do, day after day, is motivated by love? Isn't there in the deep recesses of our heart a reproach, some bitterness, a suspicion against someone? As long as we keep alive these feelings, we will not find the path to a real and continual prayer.

Of course, we must not, however, wait for these mood swings to disappear before raising our hearts to God. For, it is the Spirit who purifies and who pours out upon us His Spirit of love. *"He came into you to become one spirit with you, by the grace of this intimate union and by the outpouring of a passionate love. He knows your infirmities and your pressing needs; therefore, implore his mercy and his goodness, he cannot deny you anything at this time"*(John Mary de la Mennais, S IV, 1485). If he knows our sin, he will help us fight it, on the

condition that we know how to abandon ourselves into his hands with confidence.

TO WISH FOR THE ENCOUNTER

Where else can we find the cause of our divided heart but in ourselves? We often fail to leave matters in the hands of the guide of our spiritual life. We rely too much on our own strength which, we know all too well, is failing us. We find it hard to allow the Holy Spirit to breathe in us his life, freely. Is it because we do not believe enough in Him? Or do we fear He will take us too far? This is the same Spirit, indeed, that is in us when we pray in the oratory, and that drives our apostolic activity in an educational relationship or in the exercise of our responsibilities. Unity of life requires full receptivity to what God wants to achieve in us. Nothing less than the spirit of faith, of charity, of abnegation and of humility to which our Rule of Life⁶ invites us is required to open ourselves to God's action. We must constantly keep in check this *"wish to self-assertion in favour of a state of acceptance and of expectation"*⁷. This requires great vigilance over oneself.

See how the scribes and the Pharisees of the Gospel were closed to the Word of Jesus. They had the best intentions in the world, but did not realize they were facing the infinite beauty of God's Word. They were like blind men guiding other blind men. They closed the door of their heart to truth and love. They were prisoners of their convictions and made them a bulwark against the sweet truth of Christ. Attempts by Jesus to touch their heart met increasingly fierce opposition. Perhaps we, too, keep "walls"

⁶ Cf D 8, 9, 10 and 11.

⁷ Charles-André Bernard, *ibid.*, p. 64

around us to prevent the arrow of Love to reach us. Our heart may be hardened by dint of refusing entrance to the Other... These are obstacles that the time of a retreat should allow us to circumvent so that we may snuggle up in the silence of an attentive heart where the Beloved awaits us, and where we can open up, *"without constraint or painful effort, but with great loving simplicity."* (M. 18)

John Mary de la Mennais adds: *"One should listen to God in meditation, open the ears of our heart to receive his sacred word and feed on this manna of suavity, so as not to lose any of it, but really taste and relish it with delight... Go to Him with the simplicity of a small child that allows itself to be led by the hand."* (M, 18-19) When we know how extremely resourceful our Founder proved to be in his action-packed life, his invitations to silent meditation cannot but move us. After these words, we certainly do not feel like opposing the hectic life of an overburdened apostle to a silent, inner listening to the living Word. Was John Mary de la Mennais less taken up than we are? *"Generally, we easily feel boredom, embarrassment, reluctance with respect to prayer... Everything else seems more attractive and important,"* writes Romano Guardini who adds: *"It would be preferable not to hide behind such excuses as: 'I'm too tired,' and to declare unemotionally that we did not feel like praying. The expression does not make a good impression and weakness is obvious, but at least it would express the truth, and the path rooted in truth leads much more easily forward than disguises do"*⁸. How strong, then, is our desire of God?

⁸ Romano Guardini, *Introduction à la prière*, Paris, 1951, p. 15

TO STAY

Every apostle is first a disciple. An apostle whose word is tasteless and does not attract any longer, whose witness no longer moves hearts, is a disciple who has become estranged from his Master. His love for him has subsided. The burning words from the Cantic of Canticles are a call to come near the Beloved. The soul that is open to the infinite Love of God hears the Beloved's words: " *'Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, And come along. For behold, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers have already appeared in the land; the time has arrived for pruning the vines, and the voice of the turtledove has been heard in our land... Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come along!'*" (Sng 2, 10-13) Just like John, the beloved disciple, we will have the good fortune to lean our head on the heart of Jesus and to stay with Him. We will prolong our listening in the silence of meditation to the sweet breeze of the Spirit and of Love. Young people today need "witnesses" of Love. A child grasps intuitively the source that springs from the heart of the adult who comes to him and who wishes to make the journey with him. He can discern truth from falsehood. A prolonged prayer in daily meditation engenders in us the heart of a "son" that can reach out to the children and young people to whom we are sent. Numerous Brothers could testify to this and laypeople equally marvel at this.

We cannot set our generous commitment to the apostolic mission against the demands of a daily heart-to-heart with the Master, prolonged in our life. Therein lies the most fundamental facet of the "spiritual combat" of our life. An apostolic life cannot be happy with half measures. To say that we are "sons that have been sent" means that we stay with Jesus, that we allow Him to speak in us, heal through us, and that we forever

seek to be taught by Him and be transformed in his image. Nothing of all this can take place without the watchful decision to stay with Him at all times, without that true friendship that finds daily expression in a faithful presence, listening to the Master at the times agreed to with our Brothers.

SILENCE ALLOWS THE OTHER TO SPEAK

"The call to holiness is accepted and can be cultivated only in the silence of adoration before the infinite transcendence of God: "We must confess that we all have need of this silence, filled with the presence of him who is adored: in theology, so as to exploit fully its own sapiential and spiritual soul; in prayer, so that we may never forget that seeing God means coming down the mountain with a face so radiant that we are obliged to cover it with a veil (cf. Ex 34:33); in commitment, so that we will refuse to be locked in a struggle without love and forgiveness. All, believers and non-believers alike, need to learn a silence that allows the Other to speak when and how he wishes, and allows us to understand his words".

In practice this involves great fidelity to liturgical and personal prayer, to periods devoted to mental prayer and contemplation, to Eucharistic adoration, to monthly retreats and to spiritual exercises.

The path to holiness thus involves the acceptance of spiritual combat. This is a demanding reality which is not always given due attention today. Tradition has often seen an image of this spiritual combat in Jacob's wrestling with the mystery of God, whom he confronts in order to receive his blessing and to see him (cf. Gen 32:23-31). In this episode from the beginnings of biblical history, consecrated persons can recognize a symbol of the asceticism which they need in order to open their hearts to the Lord and to their brothers and sisters."

(*Vita Consecrata*, n° 38)

A MIRROR TO MY LIFE

What did I discover in this text which I should pay closer attention to?

What must I do for God to become more and more the Master of my life?

What advice could I give a younger Brother for his life to be fully dedicated to the service of God alone?

III

A PRAYING PERSON'S FUNDAMENTAL ATTITUDES

SILENT LISTENING

We all know that a novice does not pray like a Brother of 40 years and still less like a Brother of 80. In any case, it is not a matter of age but of spiritual journey. Wisdom, vigilance and peaceful joy are required to grasp what the Holy Spirit accomplishes in each of us.

Prayer begins in an act of silent surrender in the presence of oneself at first, then of God. It would be misleading to think that we could find happiness in a sort of avoidance of self and of reality. If we have to recollect ourselves, it is so that we may welcome the incarnate Word who comes to us and who loves us. It is a question of being present to the Presence.

Obviously, the Word of God that is read and meditated with care and without haste is a safe way to welcome Jesus and to enter into a simple and true dialogue, or into a silent heart-to-heart with Him. However, one must distinguish between a study of the Word of God and the spiritual exercise of “meditation” during which the soul sustains the quest for God, gazing upon Jesus, the Living One, drinking his Word in a loving exchange.

In meditation, one must always pay attention to the quality of one’s relationship with the Lord. Teresa of Avila so said to her Sisters: *“I do not ask you to think about Him, nor to work out various concepts, nor to draw from your spirit lofty and fine considerations; I only ask you to gaze upon Him”*⁹. This sort of advice brings to mind what our Founder wrote to the Brothers “on meditation”: *“Do not aspire to extraordinary thoughts in your meditation, nor try to elevate yourself to high contemplation through strenuous efforts. Speak to our Lord... with the same simplicity and the same confidence as you would speak to your father, your mother, your brothers, and your friends.”*¹⁰ He then advised them to fix their attention from time to time by casting a glance at a crucifix or at a holy picture.

The purpose then is to be present to the Presence, not the presence of an “abstract” or “virtual” being, but one who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Are we not the creatures of a God who is more real than ourselves? Is He not the Truth? To simply be there and love Him was what Teresa of the Child Jesus asked Him. It is not only a matter of fixing our gaze upon Him but, through his Word, to enter into a friendly relationship with Him who loves us and speaks to us today. He transforms us into his image, something we cannot achieve by ourselves. We have only

⁹ Chemin de perfection, 26, 3

¹⁰ Rule of 1825, Instruction on meditation, 79

to ardently desire this and allow Him to do with us what He wills.

I dwell on this because, for me, it is basic. As “beginners” – which we are throughout our life in many ways – when meditating on a Gospel passage, we need to adopt a method – without making it a hard-and-fast rule – as a support used wisely and in a very personal way. I do not wish to go over the various methods to which we were initiated during our formation years. They have been very well presented elsewhere, notably in one of Brother Bernard Gaudeul’s circulars¹¹. I would rather invite you to pay close attention to the work of God’s grace which offers each one of us to move along on this journey through life, each at his own pace in response to the callings of the Spirit.

There comes a time – this depends on each one’s journey – when one feels one’s closeness to the Lord becoming simpler, using few words or ideas, without consolations, dwelling in a certain night of faith. This pruning opens up the heart and the spirit, livens up faith and brings about a more lasting peace. It is then essential to hold on with perseverance, in silent surrender, with a desire renewed by faith, to do God’s will. God is greater than our heart. He knows how to come to us and to speak to us. During that time – which can be long! – it will be well always to keep the Word of God in our hands and under our eyes so that our lamp be lit for the coming of the Spouse. We will keep listening to it, ruminating it in keeping with passing inspirations, no matter how faint, yet very real, of the Spirit who speaks in the silence of prayer.

Having recourse to vocal prayers, to an image to look at or a text which moves us will always be a valuable support which we

¹¹ F. Bernard Gaudeul, *Pray, therefore*, Circular 272, June 1984

might use in order to “*collect our senses within ourselves and give them something to keep busy with*” as Teresa of Avila so realistically puts it. She admitted this about herself: “*My own soul dreaded as much meditating without a book as if it had had to tackle a large crowd. The book put things right, kept me company and, like a shield, received the frequent blows of my thoughts... Often enough, all that was needed was a book. At times I read very little, at other times quite a bit, according to the Lord’s given grace*”¹². See how unfettered one may go to meditation! Each must find his own way, seeking to follow the precious advice of predecessors in their quest of God. You know that the Rule of Life – and hence the Lord – requires that we come together for the spiritual exercise of the thirty minutes of morning meditation. This moment of the Encounter is crucial; it is with true, inner freedom that we meet our Lord while at the same time providing support to our Brothers in taking responsibility for their own prayer.

SURRENDER – HUMILITY

True surrender of oneself implies being poor. Meditation is a school of poverty. No one Brother can claim the contrary. To hold fast and progress even a little in meditation, one must eventually admit that one has not moved forward very much and that the learning process is far from being over. If, at first, we were gratified with the benefits that God grants beginners, trials and drought soon followed. Our meditation may currently look like “*a desert, a country under drought where nothing moves and nothing flowers, where one experiences one’s*

¹² Vida, 4, 9, quoted in the periodical *Vives Flammes*, n° 282, p. 40

helplessness”¹³. Meditation is then so dull that we are tempted to give in to laziness, if not to discouragement. Our spirit is so restless that we may choose to let it roam. During prayer, distractions forever harass us and push us – almost physically at times – outside the oratory so difficult it is to endure the dearth while numerous occupations – our “sense of duty” – await.

The risk is great, indeed, to drop everything. Some Brothers, and even whole communities, are seen fleeing the oratory as if God alone was too blame and we wished to blacklist him. Since he abandons us in our dark night, let us keep busy with more important matters. Without our being aware, we have capitulated, surrendered! In reality, we have refused to abandon ourselves, to surrender... In other words, we refuse to accept our poverty. Even so, our poverty should open our eyes: we are full of our own selves. The only thing of interest to us is ourselves and what shows us off to advantage in the eyes of the others and in our own eyes. *“We wish to work for God alone while helping ourselves copiously to satisfy our need for self-gratification.”*¹⁴

We must therefore learn to surrender ourselves instead of holding on to some gratifying image we may have of ourselves. To surrender ourselves is to accept our fundamental poverty. *“The poor meditation of one who progresses laboriously turns into a meditation of the poor...”*¹⁵ At such a time, as we abandon ourselves humbly into the hands of God, our joy consists in admitting our poverty. *“The poorer you are, the more the Lord*

¹³ Br. Marie-Philippe de la Ste-Famille, ocd, in *Vives Flammes*, n° 282, p. 6

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 7

¹⁵ Pierre-Marie Salingardes, « D’une pauvre oraison à une oraison pauvre », Carmel 53, 1989, p. 99

will love you,” claimed Teresa of the Child Jesus. We will then give up making speeches and will identify with small children who do not know how to pray but who stand in God’s presence bathed in his love for us.

What a beautiful school of love and of simplicity for those who would consider themselves important and mighty! True prayer needs humility. Prayer demands that we put aside self-seeking and the glorification of ourselves to others. How sad it is to see some Brothers leave the Order after so many fruitful years at the service of youth. Perhaps they lacked the simplicity of the child who recognises his vulnerability and who humbly accepts to put his hand in the hand of his Father who will lead him. All is connected in the life of a Brother. Meditation thus lived teaches us unfailingly to be Brothers after the heart of God which John Mary de la Mennais wished for us to be. The meditation of the poor teaches us that all good things come from God, not from ourselves; salvation comes from Him, not from us. Only such meditation can grant us the graces and the strength which we hope for. Self-sufficiency needs nothing from others. It relies on itself at the risk of quickly falling into destitution. Learning true prayer entails recognising our own poverty and placing our trust in God alone.

PERSEVERANCE

It may happen at times, in order to absolve ourselves for “absences” from community prayer, to think that, after all, we are not monks. As for apostolic religious, their vocation sends them off into action. There lies their prayer. Are not meditation and praying the Divine Office reserved for contemplative religious? Let us recall what our Founder said: *“Under no pretext*

should you curtail your meditation, for of all your exercises, it is the most necessary.” (Rule of 1825)

John Mary de la Mennais proposed to the Brothers a number of other “spiritual exercises” to help them stay in the presence of God in their daily activities, many of which could be beneficial to us in our personal conduct. Saint Paul reminds us: *“Always give thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God”* (Eph 5, 20). *“With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints”* (Eph 6, 18). Let us remember, however, that in order to pray perseveringly, much love is needed. As John Mary de la Mennais reminded us previously, to pray is to love. *“He prays without ceasing who unites prayer to works and good works to prayer.”*¹⁶

Perseverance in prayer thus requires careful attention to the loving presence of God who invites us to love as He does. To love God, to love one’s brother or to love young people, we have said, arises from a single desire, namely, that of letting the Spirit pray and love in us. It is not a question of indulging in laziness or seeking one’s ease. The Spirit takes hold of us and makes us burn with love. It is not a matter of feeling something artificial, but of having in oneself a firm and quiet determination to belong to God and to live for Him.

However, it is impossible to do the will of God without persevering faithfully in prayer in keeping with the Rule of Life. *“Nothing surpasses prayer; it makes possible what is impossible and what is difficult easy. For it is impossible, utterly impossible, for the man who prays eagerly and invokes God ceaselessly, ever*

¹⁶ Origen, in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n° 2745

to sin."¹⁷ Persevering in our meditation for thirty minutes every morning of our life is the best way to enter fully into the concrete reality in which we live. We do not live in ideas or in a virtual world. Reality is getting up in the morning at the stated time and getting ready, without ever abdicating before difficulties or resistance. It means making part of our daily schedule the sacred time reserved for our personal and intimate conversation with the Lord. The day we started to be unfaithful was the day we suggested that the Lord was less important than ourselves and what we have to do.

Being persistent is to be a fighter. "*Prayer and softness do not mix.*"¹⁸ When prayer becomes burdensome and heavy, rather than yield to the temptation of capitulation - which is nothing glorious - we must stand firm and struggle with God so that He makes us taste the strong and consistent food which we need for the road. Let us especially not capitulate. Remember that "*if the enemy realizes that someone is hesitant, without constancy in the good he does and without high resolution to persevere, he leaves him no rest day or night; he never ceases scaring him and causing problems to no end,*"¹⁹ insisted Teresa of Avila.

Let us never sacrifice the prayer times proposed by the Rule of Life. Let us not stop fighting when things get difficult. Let us be present to the most important minutes of our lives. To persevere is always to love, and to love even more when the battle is tougher. Let us unceasingly remain in persevering and loving prayer. Is not this the meaning of the question of Jesus: "Peter, do you love me?" Despite the falls, the setbacks, the sin, Peter does not give up. Even

¹⁷ St John Chrysostom, Anna, 4, 5, in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n 2744

¹⁸ Teresa of Avila, *Chemin de perfection*, 4, 2.

¹⁹ *Chemin de perfection*, .Ms Escorial 39, 4, in Vives Flammes, n° 282

in the thick of night, he perseveres: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

OFFERING – OBEDIENCE

"Whatever you want to do with me, thank you, I'm ready for anything, I accept everything." So wrote Charles de Foucauld in an act of total surrender, a surrender of self in the hands of the Father. He thus wished to be available, even more so, he voluntarily surrendered himself into the hands of the Father in a radical gift of himself: "I'm ready for anything"... and "I thank you" for whatever you will do with me.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, to take another life model, communed deeply with the obedience of the Son, carrying in her flesh his own sufferings. She lived to a preeminent degree what we are all called upon to live. With her, no ecstasy, but experiencing in her soul the suffering love of Jesus for the world. Those who wish to explore the depths of meditation will one day be led by the Spirit to live, to a lesser degree perhaps, this dereliction, that feeling of being abandoned by God in the footsteps of Jesus, just like Mother Teresa lived it: *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"* (Psalm 22) Thus she wrote in a "Letter to Jesus" in 1959: *"I pray no more. - I utter the words of the community prayers - and try with all my strength to draw from each word the sweetness that it has to offer. But my prayer of union is no longer there. - I pray no more. - My soul is no longer with you."* And yet, *"at that time, her prayers which she described as miserably cold and dry, proved effective and obtained many favours for others."*²⁰

²⁰ Les écrits intimes de la sainte de Calcutta, Lethielleux, p. 309

Without dwelling on this so eloquent case that is the way of the cross and love experienced by Mother Teresa, let us underscore for us, Brothers, the importance of giving ourselves up to God completely. Just being at prayer each day, with uncompromising punctuality, is the sign of the gift of our lives to God. Of course, our prayer, even when it is dry and poor, is a prayer in which we give the part of life that is the present moment. Let us not give in to dreaming, even if it never leaves us alone. We offer ourselves fully so that after half an hour of prayer, we may be happy to have tried to love God with all our heart and with all our might.

This prayer of offering will gradually transform our lives. We will understand little by little that it is not only the time of prayer that is concerned here, but every moment of our lives. This offering and commitment to do God's will be reflected in everyday life. They will become a basic attitude of our existence. Let us contemplate Mary at the Annunciation: in a radical act of offering of herself, she said an unmitigated Yes to the will of God. She then went in haste to help her cousin Elizabeth. She thus renews her generous Yes in the concrete reality of her everyday existence. The whole life of Mary is permeated with the love that gives itself freely, self-sacrificing, never seeking her own will, but only that of God.

Let us again listen to the advice given by Mother Teresa to a new "Co-operator of Christ": *"In you, today, He wants to relive his absolute submission to his Father - let Him do it. No matter how you feel - as long He feels good in you. Avoid looking at yourself and rejoice at having nothing, at being nothing, at being*

unable to do anything... Accept whatever He gives and give whatever He takes with a big smile."²¹

Are we capable of so radical a gift? Yet, we are all called to excel ourselves. In the words of Mother Teresa, we find an echo of those of John Mary de la Mennais: "*We must let ourselves be devoured by Providence... Yes, I want to be devoured by Providence. No resistance at all, not the slightest movement; let her devour me!*" (M 84). Our Founder also wrote to a friend circa 1811: "*I know from a long and painful experience that there are sorrows which seize the soul with a force which overcomes it, but we must never accommodate them at least voluntarily; we must not oppose to them a fruitless violent resistance, but a quiet acquiescence to the will of the Beloved, who operates his work in us and cleanses the house he wants to live in by his crucifying operations*" (Letter 93).

In this struggle to which he calls us, the Lord teaches us to pray - to love - in truth. If we allow ourselves to be led, He will give us the grace to enter into his heart. We really have nothing to do about it, except give ourselves up to his grace and never hide behind our own will and listen to our feelings, but always be willing to do whatever He wants. We must clearly refuse to withdraw within ourselves and to moan. We believe and we love. Therefore, we can say: "Do with me, Lord, what you will."

INTERCESSION – THANKSGIVING

"*We must let ourselves be devoured by Providence,*" wrote John Mary de la Mennais. For her part, Mother Teresa wrote:

²¹ Ibid, p. 314

"Let the poor and people devour you." For both, the same word: "devour", which means that we no longer belong to ourselves, but that we have totally given ourselves up. *"Let people 'bite' your smile, your time... Learn by heart that you must allow people to devour you,"* Mother Teresa goes on, convinced that we have no right to keep ourselves from others since we do not wish to keep anything from Christ. With both our Founder and Mother Teresa, there is no self-appointed proactive approach, but a real desire to give one's life to Christ and to the poor. Mother Teresa used to say that she allowed the faces of those she had met during the day come up in her prayer to contemplate Jesus in them and to offer them to the Father.

Why is intercessory prayer a fundamental attitude? I believe that the answer lies in the fact that we are Church, People of God, Body of Christ. In Jesus, we are supportive of each other. If one falls, all fall. If we help our brother to get up, we rise with him, and we help the community to stand up. In reality, we are never alone in prayer. We are inhabited by our brothers and sisters, youths and children who fill our lives. If we give ourselves to the Lord in prayer, we offer them to the Lord, as a result of which they receive the graces that only God knows.

It is therefore natural that, from time to time, the faces of our brothers, of young people and adults with whom we walk the path of life, should intrude at the heart of prayer. It is important then to turn this into a true prayer to Jesus, to speak to Him about them and to offer them up in the silence of prayer. But it is especially at the heart of the sacrament of the Eucharist that the prayer of intercession will arise from the heart, while Christ, the Intercessor, offers Himself to the Father for the world. The more our prayer purifies itself, the more it is inhabited. In fact, it is God who presents our brothers to us. For

a start, we do not offer them to Him. In them, he calls us to serve Him.

That is why we are fortunate to spend our meditation in the morning, these thirty minutes dedicated to God, with our brothers, and not alone. We are never alone with Jesus, or if we are alone with Him, it is the better to realize that being with Him, we are with the world, with the Church, the poor, children and young people, with all our Brothers. We welcome then all in Him. He presents then to us and says: "Do you love me in them? Do you love me in the Church? Do you love me in your Brothers and young people?"

Our prayer is truly the place par excellence where we are on a mission. As a result, the question of the unity of life no longer exists. It is in our prayer that we are missionaries when it is lived with our Brothers in the Church. Our intercessory prayer can sometimes be more insistent in response to the words of Jesus: *"To him who knocks it will be opened"* or again, *"If you ask anything in my name, I will do it."* Provided, however, that we are not on the side of "sages and scholars" who do not understand the teaching of Jesus. To children alone it is given to understand! This is perhaps why the prayer of children, and of those who resemble them, is more effective on the heart of God than that of adults. If there is a prayer in which we can really express our faith, however small, it is the prayer that intercedes for our brothers and sisters who are sick or injured.

The same childlike faith leads us also to pray for the sick through the intercession of our founders. Before praying to their intention, we must ask ourselves: "Do we or don't we wish to obtain the favour we are praying for?" There are ways of asking that do not predispose the giver to grant the favour requested. If we really wish to obtain the favour, then we will not give up

asking. We will knock on the door for as long as it takes. True intercessory prayer does not consist in a short sentence said absently; it gushes from deep within and it is full of confidence. While it is insistent, it takes for granted the answer. Brothers, we need such praying persons in the Institute today.

We also need to give thanks. Our trust in the Lord is not a vague confidence. It is concrete. It is based on the certainty that the Lord is always with us. Not a hair of our heads will fall without his permission. He takes care of us and never lets us down. He is close to the poor and hears their prayers. He is a Father who loves his children and who constantly gives them what is good for them. To give thanks is for Him the height of joy. We remember the ten lepers in the Gospel: only one came back to give thanks. He alone heard Jesus answer: "*Arise, your faith has saved you*" (Lk 17, 19). The Lord is not indifferent to our thanks, because they express our faith and love. He who does not give thanks does not realise the beauty of the gift made to him. Giving thanks is probably the most beautiful prayer that we can offer to the Lord. It is also the prayer that most expands the heart.

Who is Jesus to me?

Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta :

Jesus is the Word made Flesh.
Jesus is the Word – to be spoken.
Jesus is the Truth – to be told.
Jesus is the Way – to be walked.
Jesus is the Light – to be lit.
Jesus is the Life – to be lived.
Jesus is the Love – to be loved.
Jesus is the Joy – to be shared.
Jesus is the Peace – to be given.
Jesus is the Bread of Life – to be eaten.
Jesus is the Hungry – to be fed.
Jesus is the Homeless – to be taken in.
Jesus is the Sick – to be healed.
Jesus is the Lonely – to be loved.
Jesus is the Unwanted – to be wanted.
Jesus is the Beggar – to give him a smile.
Jesus is the Little One – to embrace him.

To me -
Jesus is my God
Jesus is my Everything.
JESUS, I love with my whole heart, with my whole being.
I have given Him all, even my sins and He has espoused me
to Himself in tenderness and love.
Now and for life I am the Spouse of my Crucified Spouse.
Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR THE PERSONAL PROJECT

What appears to me the most fundamental in my life to achieve the true way to prayer?

What difficulties do I meet and why?

Have I shared this with a “spiritual adviser / director”?

What are the main issues about which I shall try to be more careful?

QUESTIONS FOR THE COMMUNITY

In what concrete way can the community be a true support to each and everyone’s prayer?
What decisions are necessary for this to take place?

IV

MEDITATION, A PERSONAL WAY OF LIFE

John Paul II told a group of bishops: *"More people than you think would be able to pray, but nobody has taught them! However, without this interiority, the baptized waste away..."* What then can be said of the religious who neglect this daily time of encounter with God? As we have already pointed out, there are many good books to help us on the path of meditation. They are useful, especially at certain times of our lives, to understand the steps which the Spirit invites us to take to get closer to God and be purified by Him *"like gold in the furnace"* (see Wis 3, 6).

The story of our life of meditation is the story of our life as a Brother. When we were in the novitiate, we were introduced to

the "art" of prayer. We learned that there was a way to prepare ourselves for meditation, to begin meditation, to sustain the living inner dialogue and to conclude. We were also shown how to live the meditation in everyday life and how to recognize the passages of God in our lives, when evening comes.

We all know that the "consolations" that we feel are not the signs of a good meditation. When it is arduous, it can also be good if we live it in fidelity and love. The Spirit makes us walk a path to holiness that is very personal. As we progress, we must therefore better feel these interior movements of the Holy Spirit which make us better acquainted with ourselves. God often leads those whom He loves through trying nights in which praying appears impossible or – and this can happen – in which one feels that God has rejected us. *"I do not have faith – I no longer believe,"*²² Mother Teresa wrote to her spiritual adviser, while at the same time it was said of her *"that she would be speaking of Jesus in a couple of minutes" That was a constant, the common theme of her life.*²³

"Every Institute and community is a school of true evangelical spirituality" (VC 93). We are therefore trained in that school through the recommendations of our Rule of Life, the tradition of the Congregation, the writings of our founders, especially those of John Mary de la Mennais. We must strive with perseverance to study, and especially to implement, everything that is asked of us. Whoever does so will be blessed by God. It will be given to him to enter into an ever deeper friendship with Him.

²² Ibid., p. 226

²³ Ibid., p. 312

1. A WAY OF LIFE

SPIRITUAL READING

The basis of our prayer is listening to the Word of God. This means a constant attitude which goes beyond the exercise of morning meditation. It takes a lifetime. It entails openness of mind and of heart to God, the Living One in whom we believe. But without sufficient time (two hours a week as per the Rule of Life) of *Lectio Divina* which contains the reading of the Word of God through the liturgy, but also its study, and any reading of spiritual books that feed the heart and mind, it will not be possible to grow in the life of meditation. After a few months, perhaps several years, during which we inadequately fed our soul, we should not be surprised to find ourselves empty and indifferent to the things of God. In fact, *"The Brother understands that he is personally responsible for the quality of his prayer life, which he sees less as a subjection to a schedule of prayers than the loving attention to the Word and the free surrender to a Person."* (D 80) Through the patient and sustained listening to the Spirit, *"the Brother gradually discovers the path to God"*. (D 91)

VOCAL PRAYER

Jesus did not teach a method of prayer. He told us: *"When you pray, say: Our Father ..."* (Mt 6, 9). Vocal prayer, in the first place the Lord's Prayer and the Psalms, is of great value. We have a responsibility to ourselves and to our Brothers in the way we pray the Divine Office together. Depending on how it will reflect a spirit of true prayer, it will prepare us for the meditation that follows. It is important for communities to give

signs of unity in the way they pray, what witness imparts their way of "celebrating" the Divine Office, how the community prayer sets the stage for an encounter with our God and how it prepares us to listen to Him with great attention. We should be keen not overlook this common vocal prayer. We will endeavour to make it a real prayer. Most importantly, we will give silence the place it deserves so that everyone, in community, can really let the Spirit pray in his heart, He who cries "Abba".

MEDITATION

Then comes the time of meditation, those thirty minutes that we grant ourselves together, every day, usually after the Office of Lauds. Our presence to this community meditation means that we support each other in our quest of God. The oratory, in its simplicity, provides silence and beauty for the Brother's encounter with the Lord, the Master of his life. The time given to this "meditation" is not usually shortened. Otherwise, there is no peaceful and extended meeting with the Beloved of our souls which run the risk of drying out. Superiors, but also all the Brothers of the community, are careful to give their colleagues the opportunity to live fully and freely this most precious moment of the day.

THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE FRIEND

Everyone is now at the heart of the relationship with God in silence. Without going back on the preparation and the introduction to prayer, let us remember that we must put all our efforts into these stages if we are to walk in fidelity to the call of the Master, without falling asleep by the roadside.

Let us also remember the importance of our prior choice of a text of the Word of God - or another text, provided it is not a simple reading, but a support for a true prayer - presence of the Word incarnate. An appropriate body position will also help us establish communication with Him, a position that we can keep quietly, in peace and tranquility, and without tiring, while staying awake and alert. It is like a kind of "liturgy" that introduces us into prayer.

Let us further stress this entrance into meditation through an act of faith in the Love that is present in the depth of a silent heart. Then, avoiding intellectual speculation and inner chatter, we shall put our imagination and our intellect at the service of a personal encounter with the Lord. This encounter will be sustained mostly by the text of the Word of God chosen previously as a sign and support of the heart-to-heart with Jesus.

We know that love and faith are at the heart of this relationship and that they need to be purified to be true. The quality of our meditation should not be measured by the quantity and the strength of the feelings moving us, but by the love and faith of which we will be capable at the heart of our mission. With time, the Lord tries to open the door to a greater intimacy which surpasses our understanding and which fashions us gradually into his image. Thus, the *"intimate commerce of friendship where we share one-on-one with the God who loves us"* (Teresa of Avila, Vie, Chap. VIII) will slowly become simpler. We will no longer need to rely on the "consolations" which God gives to beginners. We will be able to walk with Him on the steep roads which will open us to a real surpassing of self to love in truth. Meditation will become a true school of love.

Let us also stress the conclusion to be given to this time of meditation. We must learn to offer ourselves in a few simple

words so as to remain with the Lord and accomplish his will throughout the day. To that end, each one must discern the voice of the Spirit who will inspire him how he can keep on being "the companion" of Jesus in the midst of action.

REVISION OF LIFE

In the evening, at prayer time, we must also take the necessary time to review the day. This is the *Lectio Vitae*, a time to reconsider, humbly and truthfully, the road traveled during the day with the Lord present at the heart of our existence and in the faces of our brothers and sisters inviting us to love and to the gift of self. This appraisal of the day is an opportunity to connect with the morning meeting with the Lord. There is a close connection between the conclusion of our meditation that allowed us to seize the grace received, and the revision of life in the evening that allows us to see how this grace has borne fruit or faded into the oblivion and the neglect of a heart too preoccupied with itself. As for the morning meditation, one can say that the evening revision of life ought to become simpler. Time and practical wisdom teach the heart to discern the movements of the Lord's grace in our life which, little by little, imperceptibly, transfigures those who are permeable to his guidance. Thus, with time and within the charism of the Congregation in which we have been called, we can understand what is our "personality" before the Lord, our "spiritual ideal", the "words" that God speaks to us through a particular text of the Bible, the "programme of life" written by the Spirit in our heart, the "facet" of the image of Jesus we are called to be.

2. LEAVING EVERYTHING TO FOLLOW HIM

At certain times in our life, the Lord wants us to hear his call to launch into the deep, to follow Him more closely, to allow Him to take over our prayer and our life, so to speak. With passing meditations, we have evolved. Our prayer has become simpler, more silent, and possibly more difficult also... We have kept on seeking inspiration in the Word of God or some other text without finding the nourishment which we felt we needed. A feeling of not knowing how to pray may have caused some discouragement to the point of not knowing what to do. It is important to discern these callings from the Spirit, but they require our full attention and, often enough, the assistance of a spiritual adviser.

AN INTERIOR CALL

In reality, the Lord invites us to enter a stage of purification. Of course, we do not reach this stage automatically as if we needed so many years of prayer to get there. It is God who takes the initiative to come to us through a free decision on his part. It is clear, however, that the Brother who, for years, has tried to live his life truthfully, has dedicated himself generously to the mission with the youth, has sought to be a humble servant of his Brothers, such a one has already matched the interior movements of the Spirit and corresponded with his grace. He has already come a long way and is ready to enter the burning and purifying hearth of Love.

THE NEED FOR A SPIRITUAL GUIDE

Spiritual writers, John of the Cross among the first, note that many are moved by this grace, but that few can relate to it. They

often do not understand what is happening to them and they do not have a good spiritual guide to advise them. Yes, we need this well-informed guide if we want to undertake the way to holiness on a firm footing. With him, we discern the call of the Spirit in prayer and we seek to understand in what ways the Lord leads us. Without him, we may not give the work of God in us the chance to flourish in abundant fruits of charity and of hope for the world and for us.

OUR INTERNAL RESISTANCES

*"The cunning of the superficial self seeks to defend itself against the ascendancy of God; we refuse to lose our life."*²⁴ We know our failings, we are conscious of our sin. We have gradually created for ourselves a persona that seeks to be admired and that has some authority over others. We don't really wish to leave behind this secret pride. Let us admit it, we love whatever attracts other people's attention and look down on what is unseen and humble. We love the praise whereby we feel we have been useful.

"We must consider, says a spiritual writer, that any refusal of mortification or any voluntary imperfection (concerning charity, especially) immediately stops prayer until that sin is peacefully and soundly rejected." However, the sin which humbles us is also a door that opens the heart to God, provided we do not accept compromises. In this sense, it is important that we learn to discern the pitfalls on the road to an authentic spiritual life:

²⁴ A Carthusian monk, *La Prière, entre combat et extase*, Presses de la Renaissance, p. 195

- In the first place, fatigue prevents us from being well-disposed, heart and soul, to enter into a loving relationship with the Creator.
- Self-sufficiency which is the attitude of one who seeks to justify himself in his own eyes as well as in the eyes of the others rather than let go of self in all simplicity.
- The discouragement of one who wishes, immediately and effortlessly, to live up to the dream of himself. While he seeks to identify all real or imaginary obstacles to his prayer, he complicates, on the contrary, what can only be found in simplicity.
- The bitterness of one who has turned round on himself in a very narcissistic way, irritated by what he interprets as contempt towards him. He then withdraws into resentment and never really tastes inner peace.

In this context, we can easily understand that prayer is difficult. Prayer should help us pull out of ourselves to listen to the Other, but we would rather look at ourselves, forgetting that it is God whom we are invited to contemplate. A thorough cleansing will be needed not to be blinded by our own desires. Fortunately, the Lord does not give up easily. He constantly tries to teach us to convert our intelligence and our will. He wants us all to Himself, while we are so dispersed. His wish for us is to undergo a progressive purification of our feelings in order to guide us towards genuine and fully disinterested love.

PURIFICATION TIME

Because God wants to purify us, the practice of meditation of the Word of God that we used to realize is more difficult. It has

lost its flavour. Yet, at the same time, we are engaged in ministry with joy and the desire to be truly servants of the Kingdom. The Word, however, is silent to the ears of our hearts. At least, we experience it as such. We do not know what to do. We remain true to the time of prayer, but "it's dark." We are looking for ways to find an easier way, but at this point, as underscored by a spiritual writer, "*there is no road map*" to indicate the route to follow. We must keep moving "in the night" and listen carefully to the Spirit's action.

For many, however, the risk is to stop looking. While the inner darkness sets in and we are not able to restore the light, the temptation is great to stop, plain and simple. Some have abandoned prayer at the door of this important stage because of fear, misunderstanding or exhaustion. Others choose to take a book and browse through its pages, denying the Lord the possibility to speak to them in the depths of a heart that multiple thoughts have rendered insensitive to the inner words of the Spirit.

SIMPLE PIECES OF ADVICE

How shall we fight the good spiritual fight? Here are some tips to remember in a dialogue with a spiritual guide, not forgetting the basic requirement: a good provision of quiet determination to meet Jesus and Jesus alone, not seeking ideas about Him, being eager above all else to meet Jesus and only Him:

- Always be present for meditation. Never agree to shorten the allotted time. If this is done, it must be the exception, remembering that meditation is the most important exercise of our day.

- Love the prayer that is our own. Avoid looking for something else. The meditation is God's way of coming to us. If we love our meditation, we will love God who dwells therein. On the other hand, we should not spend our time internally feeding our dissatisfaction. Again, this would be self-seeking.
- Begin meditation consciously but quietly and peacefully placing yourself in the presence of God. A single word can help, without stirring up emotions. Emotions are constructive when they come from God. We must be wary of our own. We can whisper these words interiorly: "Come, dwell in me, cleanse me, take me, I want to do your will", or others that we find more suitable.
- Meditate on the words of the Gospel if you are so inclined and if this fosters a peaceful relationship with the Lord. If this is not the case, simply gaze on Christ, without lofty considerations, without trying to "say something", or without worrying about your imagination and intruding thoughts. Let us just quietly brush them aside, with a dismissive wave of the hand as it were. Let us peacefully remain in the presence of Jesus who loves us. If need be, we may repeat a simple prayer which keeps alive within us the wish to remain at God's disposal. There is no need for conscious thinking; true, inner silence suffices. Such an attitude at the feet of Jesus, even in the dark, can bring happiness and peace.
- Be aware that we may have more often than not to alternate between the more traditional meditation of the Word of God and this form of more unadorned prayer that is taught in the night.

- During the day, we will attempt often to train our will on the Lord through acts of faith. Here again, a single word, a simple prayer of the heart, a “God alone” or any other short formula may express our desire to be at the Lord’s service.

DISCERN THE FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT

There is no progress in spiritual life without constant, interior vigilance in an ambience of serenity and peace. It is good, on the occasion of a retreat or recollection, to look back and take stock of what we experience in our time of prayer. Meeting a spiritual adviser on a regular basis may help think things over in a fruitful way. Such a review should help us better understand the signs that show that we are on the right track, for our daily life mirrors the way in which we allow the Spirit to lead us in prayer. True prayer makes us malleable in the hands of God. Only then can the fruits of the Spirit flourish in us. They are “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*” (Gal 5, 22-23)

In so doing, we will always remember that the Lord is near to the heart of a poor, to those who humble themselves and who joyfully welcome their condition, trusting fully in the Lord. In order to do this, we must learn to shed the worries that undermine us. Those who seek the will of God do not let worries and anxieties destabilise them. They lay them in the hands of the Lord.

GIVE FREELY

To conclude, we may wish to keep in mind that the only way to progress in prayer is by praying. We have limited ourselves

here to speaking about the morning meditation. Let us recall, however, what our Rule of Life recommends: *“Besides the daily prescribed prayers, the Brothers are encouraged to add certain prayers according to their personal dispositions.”* (D 88) True prayer is not satisfied with what is prescribed. It seeks to go further, to expand. It does not just do the minimum. Prayer knows that in order to grow, it should open up. If we want to make of meditation a real life path, we must learn to give, not the frills of our time, but that time that is most precious to us, following the example of the widow of the Gospel who gave what she needed and not what she had no more use for. Each one is advised to take stock of himself before the Lord: “Am I not invited to choose additional time during the day or night to express my wish to give myself to Him alone and to offer to Him the young people who are entrusted to my care?” We may wish to submit our personal answer to that question to a superior or a spiritual adviser to ensure that our choice is also God’s.

A few Reflections of Teresa of Avila

"I find myself laughing at souls at times: when meditating, they think that they are ready to be humiliated and despised publicly for the love of God; but then they will hide, if they can, a small mistake that they have committed. The more so if they are falsely accused; they are beside themselves." (5th House, Chap. 3)

"Here are persons who are so carefully assessing the meditation and so hooded when practicing it that they do not dare move for fear of disturbing a thought or of losing the least flavour or consolation that they find therein, and when they imagine that perfection consists in such things, I say to myself that their understanding of the way to union is very limited. No, no, that is not the way. It is the works that the Lord asks of us... Do this (the works of love) out of love of God who wants it, as you so well know. Such is the true union to his will." (Ibid.)

"It seems to me that there are four ways to water a garden. First, by drawing water from a well by force of arms, which requires a great fatigue on our part; or in turning, using a crank, an endless stream of buckets: with less work one draws a large amount of water; or by bringing water from a river or a stream: the earth is thus better watered and better soaked...; and finally, there is heavy rain: it is the Lord who waters then, with no work on our part, and this mode of watering is beyond comparison much superior to those we have spoken about." (Life, Chap. XI)

A MIRROR TO ONE'S LIFE

What can I say about my own prayer journey?

In a few lines, I write what I wish to keep from
this reading for my own personal prayer
journey

CONCLUSION

To conclude this circular letter, let us borrow a few lines from Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical letter, “God is Love”.

In the second part of the text, after having spoken about the excellence of charity, he ends up by stressing the importance of radical humility in the service of our brothers. In fact, he recalls that “*we are unprofitable servants*” (Lk 17, 10) and goes on: “*When we consider the immensity of others' needs, we can, on the one hand, be driven towards an ideology that would aim at doing what God's governance of the world apparently cannot: fully resolving every problem. Or we can be tempted to give in to inertia, since it would seem that, in any event, nothing can be accomplished.*” (n° 36)

We may run this double risk in our apostolic life. We can show much initiative and implement all of our God-given talents since we are convinced of the good that we can do to educate and to evangelise according to the Mennaisian charism, but we forget that the main actor is God. We can also limit ourselves to

the strict minimum in carrying out the mission entrusted to us, forgetting the personal commitment essential to all true apostolic action. How can we avoid one and the other snares? Through prayer, is the Pope's answer: *"Prayer, as a means of drawing ever new strength from Christ, is concretely and urgently needed."* (n° 36) Further on, he adds: *"In the saints one thing becomes clear: those who draw near to God do not withdraw from men, but rather become truly close to them."* (n° 42) He then invites us to gaze upon Mary, *"Mother of the Lord and mirror of all holiness"*. He defines as follows her programme of life: *"Not setting herself at the centre, but leaving space for God, who is encountered both in prayer and in service of neighbour."* (n° 42)

We must therefore look up to Mary if we wish to learn true prayer. Mary has accomplished unity in her life since she gave up everything. Her heart was permeable to the light of God. *"Mary's greatness consists in the fact that she wants to magnify God, not herself... her thoughts are attuned to the thoughts of God, her will is one with the will of God... As a believer who in faith thinks with God's thoughts and wills with God's will, she cannot fail to be a woman who loves."* (n° 41) Mary is the mother of all believers. She is also a mother to us who wish to believe and love better. To gaze upon her and to pray to her will help us learn to think and to will "with" God.

This learning process is a long road which demands purification and humility as we have seen in these pages. This is why we cannot waste any time. The Lord is here. Do we hear his call? Mary invites us to set on the journey "in haste" (Cf. Lk 1, 39) to love "with" the Lord. As we have said, meditation is the school of true love. Mary, who teaches us how to love, invites us to place ourselves under the guidance of Jesus whose side was

transfixed and from which gushed forth “*rivers of living water*” (Jn 7, 38). Let humbly ask for her help when we pray.

Since we have started this circular letter with Peter’s testimony in answer to Jesus’ question, let us conclude it by casting another glance at him as he followed Jesus in his Passion and shed bitter tears after denying Him three times. If we wish to pray after the example of Jesus, it may be necessary to ask God for the gift of tears which are pleasing to Him and purify us. Tears “*lift up prayer and, with prayer, enlighten the eyes of the soul*”²⁵. Having made our own Peter’s humility, we will then be able to say truthfully from the depth of our being: “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Brother Yannick Houssay

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August 15, 2012, Feast of the Assumption

²⁵ Cf. Michel Cool, *Conversion au silence*, Salvator, 2012, p. 171