

Introduction to the Assembly on Shared Mission

Ploërmel, 19th-23rd August 2008

I am delighted, this morning, in opening this first day to once again welcome you all here, coming, as you do, from the four corners of the world, to participate in this Mennaisian Assembly.

Ploërmel is the symbol of the Mennaisian fraternity, the heart of the Mennaisian gospel family.

Ploërmel is the symbol of our unity in the service of the same Church mission. For many too it is the symbol of a life commitment to this service, a commitment of the whole person.

When we live in these surroundings, even for a period of a few days, we feel our heart opening up to the needs of the world and of the church, as it would have done for Jean-Marie De La Mennais. We feel like members of a large family in time and space.

Ploërmel, is the place where we can come closer, in a certain way, to the one who is for us a father, a guide, a resource. And we can talk with him, since God has given him the gift of this charism which enriches the Church.

This gift which lives today through our own listening to the Spirit, and in our personal and community commitment, finds here an elegant expression.

This Assembly can only bear fruit if, in the manner of Jean-Marie de La Mennais and of Gabriel Deshayes, his friend and co-founder of the congregation, we listen together to the Spirit, following in the footsteps of Jesus, in communion with the whole Church.

We come from different backgrounds, but we are united by the same mission and by a call to explore today all the riches of the Mennaisian charism.

We may have different ways of judging, seeing and thinking, but it is the same Spirit who guides us. We are endowed with different gifts that we express through our different cultures, but it is the same service of the Church that we want to be involved in. We also have different vocations that serve the one vocation to holiness, that is to say, a vocation to be the image of Jesus at the heart of the world, Jesus who welcomes children and encourages them to grow.

I invite you to enter into this experience with a fraternal heart. This is for us a requirement for truthfulness, a call of the Spirit, a condition for fruitfulness.

The General Council wanted to hold this Assembly in order to respond to request of the 2006 General Chapter: "The General Council will oversee the development of a framework for shared mission. Provinces will be able to develop this with the laity and offer training courses in spirituality and Mennaisian pedagogy, possible ways of involvement in the mission, and possible ways of experiencing community adapted to one's state of life, all moving towards the formation of Mennaisian lay fraternities".

We thought that in order to respond to this demand it was preferable to bring together the largest number of laity and Brothers. Thus, "*Which of you here*", Jesus tells us, "*intending to build a tower, would not first sit down and work out the cost and see if he had enough to complete it?*" (Lk 14:28)

Central to what is currently giving new dynamism to our living out of the shared mission throughout the congregation is the need to reflect, understand and discern. I recall here the questions raised by Marie-Jo Thiel, a theologian, at a meeting of religious and laity in Lourdes, October 2007 on the theme: spiritual families: a new face of the Church? "What are we doing about these young shoots? Do we let them develop in the wild? Do we prune them? But with what shape in mind, what use? For whom? To what end and by which means?"

We have all welcomed with joy this magnificent passage from Vita Consecrata (No 55): *“The participation of lay people often gives rise to unexpected and fruitful new perspectives on certain aspects of our charism, by giving them a more spiritual interpretation and by prompting suggestions for new apostolic enthusiasm.”*

To make the most of this new enthusiasm, we who are Mennaisians, disciples of Jean-Marie De La Mennais, we must ask ourselves some fundamental questions: is it indeed our goal to follow Christ in the way Jean-Marie De La Mennais did? What image of Jesus and what gospel messages are revealed today by this charism in our societies, in the church? Are we humble prophets and missionaries within the Church communion, acting according to the inspiration of the Spirit?

The congregation has been moving forward in this way for several decades. The last few General Chapters have welcomed and embraced this move. The Chapter of 2000 saw the participation of several lay people in the capitular assembly. Some of us, European Mennaisians, recall the gathering in Bilbao, so full of potential and promise in 2004.

But we must take a further step forward together, at Congregation level, whilst rejoicing in the different forms of expression that our commonly formulated proposals will take in the various countries where we are present.

An initial survey was proposed, preceded by a letter I sent to you outlining its importance. You have, I believe, received the results from Provincials and Vice Provincials.

Following this, the General Council sent for your consideration a text which attempted to define how laity and Brothers could work together serving the same charism. We received a number of responses to this text. This has allowed us to improve it considerably, at least we hope so. You have been given this latest version of the text for this meeting.

Today, we are gathered here at this Assembly to continue our reflection. You are all here in the name of the Brothers and Laity of your Provinces and Vice Provinces, of your countries. I am grateful to you for accepting to take part in this next step.

What we will live through here is going to challenge us. In fact, how indeed can we hope to listen together to the Spirit with such diversity amongst us and still be able to discern the most effective ways forward. Undoubtedly because the same desire inhabits our hearts, to follow the work of Jean-Marie de La Mennais.

We are here to take these questions further, to the level of whole Congregation. We should therefore share the concerns of all. We are conscious of the importance of our work together which, I believe, should follow an outline such as this:

1. Welcome what is lived out across the congregation. To make every effort to understand how the seed has been sown or is growing and to see the fruits thus far.
2. Journey with others on their way, for we carry a treasure in frail vases and we must walk step by step with those who embark on these new paths. These young shoots need to be tended by devoted companions who only want what God wants.
3. Give to those who want to embark on this route the means to go forward with confidence, through personal and community training. This is one of our tasks, perhaps the one that will engage us most.
4. Build together, Brothers and Laity, a structure inspired by the Spirit. To build together presupposes that people know each other and that they share a common goal. And in our case, this presupposes, above all, being grafted on the same tree, drinking from the same spring which is the charism of the Founder.
5. To build together also requires one to be without fear, to open doors and if necessary, to consider structures which will allow all to move forward with more freedom and fidelity, listening to the Spirit.

Why have this international Assembly, if not to allow the whole Congregation, indeed the whole Mennaisian family, the chance to ask questions and to take another step forward following Jesus, inspired by the Spirit, who continues to speak to us today as he did to Jean-Marie de La Mennais.

I invite you therefore to undertake a spiritual exercise in the form of spiritual discernment. What we are going to experience is not simply the organisation of an association nor the search for ways to live better together. It is an undertaking related to the action of the Spirit in the church and in the world of today. We must be totally convinced of this fundamental aspect of the experience we are getting ready to live out. That is why:

- We will pray and we will do our best to listen to the Spirit through listening to the Word of God.
- We will share truthfully what is deep in our hearts. It is from this approach founded on truthfulness and sensitive listening that we will hear the Spirit and discern our way ahead.
- We will listen to each other calmly and sensitively, for we know that God uses each of us to make known the richness and beauty of his will.

After this Assembly the General Council will take up its work again and assume its own responsibility to propose “a framework for shared mission” such as the General Chapter 2006 asked us to do. For the present I cannot say more because we must wait for this present session to have carried out its process of discernment. The members of the General council will on the whole assume a listening role during this process.

To finish, I would like to repeat that there can be no truly spiritual initiative unless it is undertaken in a spirit of fraternity. Father De La Mennais said: “ When I speak of love, I do not mean just love of God and of neighbour in general; I mean that we must be so united, and that there be such harmony between us that we can attribute to ourselves, in all its meaning, this word of St Paul: one Body and one Spirit.”

This does not mean that seeking to be united is at the expense of truth. No, love allows us to be open to others, but with an emphasis on seeking the truth, a concern to be in tune with what God wants, not alone but together! This requires a lengthy period of dialogue, mutual respect and prayerful listening to God.

Let us embrace this new undertaking, by replying to the advice of St Paul: “Never try to suppress the Spirit. Think before you do anything. Hold on to what is good” (1 Th 5:19) I thank you for accepting to be part of this initiative.

Bro Yannick Houssay S.G.