

WEAVING A TAPESTRY OF RELATIONSHIPS IN THE MANNER OF JESUS

Lettre n° 3

to the Mennaisian Family

Abidjan ————— 8th December 2009

GOD WEAVES LINKS WITH US ■

As we approach Christmas, together, we open our hearts to the contemplation of the God of the Alliance (Note 1), God the Creator who loves his creatures to the extent of inviting us to be his children. He approaches us by making himself a child. And He invites us to resemble him.

When the Lord came to us, he alerted the « little ones », the despised, the least of all. « In the neighbourhood there were shepherds out in the fields keeping guard over their sheep during the watches of the night » (Lk. 2: 8).

Luke admirably makes us enter into this mystery of God who approaches men to renew the bonds of Love that, from all eternity, he wanted to seal with them. To the dazzled shepherds, he sends his angel, « *and the glory of the Lord shone round them* ». The angel said to them: « *Do not be afraid. Look, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people: Today, a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger* » (Lk 2: 9 12).

Today, we speak of the « first announcement » (Note 2) evoking the act that consists in proposing the treasure of faith in Jesus, 'the Lord saves' (cf. Mt 1: 21), to those who do not know him. Here, it is the angel of the Lord, accompanied by « *a great throng of the hosts of heaven* » (Lk 2:13), who is responsible for this first announcement. It is addressed to those whose heart is not cluttered and who can still listen to the Spirit blowing like a light breeze. To the poor, He who is « *of divine condition* » presents himself as a true beggar of love.

That is the way the God of the Alliance, the Father from heaven weaves the links with us.

BECOMING LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN ■

Jesus, the Master, the Teacher, is a Child, sleeping in a manger!

Note 1 :

The God of the Alliance.
How can we approach this God who likes to be close to us ? From where does prayer flow, this dialogue with God? Very often, the Bible tells us that it is the heart that prays. If it is far from God, our prayer is vain. The heart is the link of our meeting with God, it is the place of the alliance. Prayer is the relationship of the alliance between God and each one of us. It is the action of God and of man, so says the Catechism of the Catholic Church. By it, and with God, we weave the links of love.

Note 2 :

The Church is missionary. We, Christians, are this Church, impatient to see this Good news reach all peoples. 'The Church draws from the Evangelisation the missionary dynamism which renders her fecund from within and gives her proper identity', the General Directory for Catechism tells us. How can we not feel called to « *always render the face of Christ more visible by a more incisive announcement, corroborated by a coherent testimony* », said also John-Paul II to the 2nd Synod for Europe.

Note 3 :

Here is what Jean-Marie de la Mennais wrote in 1808, concerning the teachers in his « small schools » :
« Never shall we have good pupils if we do not have good teachers; for, it is only after teaching a language for a long time that we can teach it well; it is only after several years that we acquire such a precious talent of judging the children well, of discovering and directing their tastes, their thoughts, their budding inclinations, in a word, of forming their character... » This necessitates formation and perseverance.

Note 4 :

Article 29 of the International Convention of the Rights of the Child: The member States strongly advise that the education of the child must aim at: (1) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; (2) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations; (3) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living; the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own; (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of

By the incarnation, he invites us to resemble little children, and thereby enter into a fraternal relationship with them that unites our souls to theirs.

In the school, which draws its inspiration from Jean-Marie de la Mennais, the teacher, in the image of Christ, holds an important place. If he is a Brother, he is also the angel who speaks in the name of the only begotten Son and accompanies his young followers on their way so that they may go to meet Him (Note 3).

The teacher, the educator, incarnates Jesus who blesses children and helps them to grow. He represents Jesus who, in them, sees the beauty of the Father's work. When he prays he can say as Christ: *« I bless you, Father, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little children »* (Lk 10 : 21).

Jean-Marie de la Mennais used to ask his Brothers to become like those they were addressing, like the children they taught. He did not consider this counsel as optional; he thought it fundamental for the right educational attitude inspired by the Gospel. *« My Brothers, your glory is to make Christians of these children... these children whom you must resemble so that the kingdom of heaven may belong to you. »*

This is, in some way, what John Paul II told the teachers: *« Love your pupils. True pedagogy feeds on love. [...] What happy and marvellous formation of souls can the school become when the pupil, in a climate of reciprocal affection and esteem, is really the follower of his teacher, as his son and his friend. What result and what joy! It is the prodigious fruit of love. What road can be more direct than that of love – at once discrete, serious, gentle and strong – for the pupils in your schools! »*

« IT IS TO ME THAT YOU DID IT. » ■

Twenty years ago, the world leaders adopted the Convention relative to the Rights of the Child (Note 4). It was the first obligatory international juridical instrument to state the whole panoply of civic, cultural, economic, political and social human rights, in favour of children. They too have rights. Very often, they need protection and special help, especially the weakest and the youngest among them.

Yet, still today, more than 115 million children of primary school-going age in the world, and more than half of whom are girls, do not attend any school. This is an outright violation of their rights since we must give to all a chance of developing

themselves, of growing up, and later on of building a better life, for themselves, their neighbours and for their own children.

We have, perhaps, close to us, a child to save, to educate, to help grow up, and to love. What do we do for him? Who is he for us? Jesus, better than anyone else expresses forcefully the grandeur of the child when he says : *«In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me»* (Mt, 25:40).

To have a fraternal, paternal, or maternal relationship with children is to permit them to become respectable and responsible adults. To weave links with them is to be at their service just like Jesus, the Servant, who put on his apron and washed the feet of his disciples.

THE CHILDREN OF AFRICA ■

Recently, in October, a Synod for the Church in Africa was held in Rome, (Note 5). It was an event of great importance for this Continent, called to build a world of justice and peace, a world wherein are weaved true fraternal ties in favour of those abandoned by all, and notably the numerous children.

It seems to me that these few words of a journalist who covered this event show clearly what the African Bishops, gathered in Rome, bore in their hearts of Pastors.(note 6)

“Trust ! Rise up, African continent!” said Benedict XVI at the end of the Synod, recalling “God’s predilection for those deprived of freedom and peace, for those whose personal human dignity is violated. “It is through excruciating pain that these Bishops see child-soldiers being armed with kalachnikovs, that they see their Dioceses being depleted of millions of emigrants who go to die in these open cemeteries such as the Mediterranean sea, the Sahara desert or the vast forest of Congo, that they see a part of the African elite participate in the pillaging of their own countries, that they see entire families decimated by the Aids pandemic. All this, they were able to share among themselves and announced it to the world. For this was truly a universal Synod » (Frédéric Mounier, — *La Croix*).

IN A SPIRIT OF COMMUNION ■

The educative community is a *«school of the person and of persons »* (Eduquer ensemble dans l’école catholique, n° 13) (Note 7). And when it refers explicitly to the gospel message, this school becomes a

sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;

Note 5:

Benedict XVI, in June 2005, expressed his attachment to the Church in Africa: *« I cherish great confidence that such a meeting (the Synod) mark a new impulse of the evangelisation, of the consolidation and of the growth of the Church, of the promotion of reconciliation and of peace on the African Continent »*. It is in 2007 that he announced the sitting of the Synod in October 2009. The 32 Episcopal Conferences of Africa answered the questions of the Lineamenta) before November 2008. And on the 19th March 2009, during his visit to Yaoundé, the Pope gave the Instrumentum laboris to the Bishops.

Note 6:

Testimony of a Bishop: *« I did not expect from the Synod a wave of a magic wand but an occasion of giving Africa another start so that she may take more responsibility for her own affairs. I take it as something rather internal to Africa. I was not waiting for something from outside to push her but something that gives her another start. And I think that we have such a start. Like the greater part of the Fathers of the African Synod who analysed the African situation without condescension or complaisance, and who listened to the Fathers from other continents, I*

think that we have ended the Synod very encouraged to go and resume our ministry with new vigour » notes Mgr Fidèle Agbachi, Archbishop of Parakou in Benin.

Note 7 :

On the 15th December 1966, Pope Paul VI proclaimed the decree attesting the heroicity of the virtues of Jean-Marie de la Mennais. Since that time, the Brothers, laypersons and youth pray that the Lord grant us a favour through his intercession so that the Church may declare him Blessed. A few months ago, Brother Delfin Lopez, was requested by the Brothers to examine through the Roman Congregation romaine for the causes of saints, all the favours through the intercession of our Founder, and to study with the help of medical Doctors, the case of the cure of an Argentine child by the name of Enzo Carollo. A Doctor, unable to find other explanations had to acknowledge it: "It's your God who has saved Enzo." For some time, he still had convulsions: they have hitherto disappeared since one year.

Note 8 :

On the 3rd of September 1869, 4 Brothers left Ploërmel for the last mission founded by Jean-Marie de la Mennais. They arrived in Tahiti on the 17th of October 1860, and opened the first school on the 5th of December in that same year. The Vice-province of Tahiti underlined this event on the 17th of October last by opening the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Brothers in Polynesia.

school of the « spirituality of communion ».

That means that the persons there, both young and adults, weave fraternal relationships. They know they are called to build their happiness together, by deepening in themselves the capacity of being attentive to the « neighbour » as a person who is close, in need of help and support, and who cannot live alone.

« That implies also the capacity [...] of giving a place to all the gifts of the Spirit, in a relation of reciprocity between the different ecclesial vocations » (Eduquer ensemble dans l'école catholique, n° 16).

Jean-Marie de la Mennais Year – which should open in November 2010 – will offer us a good opportunity of becoming impregnated with this spirit of communion, of unity and of fraternity. We shall then learn to sow abundantly the Word of God, the source of love and of peace, in answer to the call that Jean-Marie de la Mennais addressed to his Brothers a few days before dying. « *Sow a lot* » (Note 8).

« It is only after sowing the Word of God abundantly and generously that we can engage ourselves on the paths of education and accompaniment, of formation and of discernment. All that is connected with this small seed, a mysterious gift of divine Providence, that sets free an extraordinary power. It is, indeed, the Word of God that operates in itself in an efficacious manner what it says and desires » (Benedict XVI, July 2009).

May the time of Christmas be the manifestation, for each and everyone, of the 'new links' that the Lord has deigned to weave with us in his Son made-man, Jesus Christ.

Brother Yannick Houssay, s.g.

Abidjan (Ivory Coast), on 8th December 2009

On the feast of the Immaculate Conception.