

Advent 2009

The Mennaisian Family
On-going Formation

THE WORD AT THE CENTRE OF OUR LIVES

Journey for the time of Advent

***“Brothers, communities and Provinces,
convinced of the importance given by our Founders
to the Word of God and to the Rule of Life,
seek inspiration from them and try to find ways
and means to place them
at the very heart of their life.”
(General Chapter 2006, Reborn in hope)***

Dear Brothers and Lay Mennaisians:

The time of Advent will soon be upon us; the proposals that follow are simple means of enhancing our communion through making the Word of God at the centre of our lives.

The last General Chapters have strongly recommended the practice of Lectio Divina as a way of encountering our Lord. In the same spirit, the Church has recently celebrated the Synod of the Word to again show its importance in the eyes of the faithful. Our proposal is in keeping with the same inspiration which is also that of John Mary de la Mennais: *“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.” (M, 18-19)*

The Lectio Divina is a pedagogy that is a companion for the day, from our waking up in the morning to the revision of life at the end of the day. It is a matter of allowing the Word of God to make its way in us to such an extent that it informs our thoughts, our choices, our relationships and our actions. Gradually, in the course of our life, through this constant proximity, the Father through the Spirit and the Word shapes the thoughts and feelings of the Son in our hearts so that the whole of our being, including our instincts and emotions, our conscious and unconscious mind are progressively evangelized.

As we know, according to the tradition of the Church, Lectio Divina is not confined to the time of meditation; and neither is it the study of the Bible, however necessary this may be to enhance its understanding. *“A Lectio Divina that does not lead to a personal and living assimilation of the Book in our life is somehow deficient. The commentaries of the Scriptures which we use for a better grasp of the text are but helps in this process of assimilation, hence the importance of choosing them well. Commentaries that satisfy the intellect only should be complemented with more spiritual interpretations when they ought not to be forsaken altogether” (Cassingena-Trévedy, 32).*

Whoever practices Lectio Divina aims at spiritual nourishment and inner enlightenment, at a revision of life in the light of what the Lord tells one in the

Scriptures (Bianchi, 13). Lectio Divina requires a receptive mind, convinced as we ought to be that the Scriptures speak to us personally: it is a personal encounter with “the one who is speaking with you” (Jn 4, 26; 9, 37). Better still, we are not only recipients (God speaks to me), we are not only the objects of the dialogue (God speaks about me), but we are living participants in a dialogue (I reply to God, I speak with him, I say what he tells me).

In order to discover how the Word of God is at the heart of the bonds which they forge with children and young people, educators and colleagues, Mennaisians should be well acquainted with the Scriptures.

“If Jesus Christ, my dear children, declared that he who hears and keeps his word is happier than the most holy Virgin herself who bore Him in her womb, with what lively gratitude must we listen to the lessons the Gospel gives us! We must receive them as if the Lord were speaking himself, for his disciples have faithfully transmitted the instructions that came from his mouth to us. They are written so that, until the end of the world, all those who are fortunate to belong to him should hear the voice of Jesus Christ. Let us then open the ears of the heart, so that this word of truth penetrates and nourishes our soul. We should never let a day pass without reading some passages from this sacred book; it is the will of our Father; it is the deposit of his promises; it is the collection of his speeches, and the history of his life. We could not meditate on it with too much attention...” To the “Congreganists”, on the Mass, S III, 927-8

The suggestions that follow are **but propositions** for a deepening of the Sunday gospels on the Advent journey.

The suggestions are meant to help **prepare the time of personal and / or community meditation**. They do not replace the meditation; they are intended for a reading prior to the time of meditation. The morning meditation is a time of encounter with the Lord, not a reading session.

A few passages from the Fathers of the Church have been selected to help us read and meditate the Scriptures as did our Founder.

Each chapter draws from the Gospel **Mennaisian themes** in keeping with our spirituality. The words of John Mary lead us to discover the will of God in our lives.

A framework for a **community meeting** is proposed during which sharing spiritual experiences rather than theological debates should take place. Having read the proposed passages before the meeting will help achieve this.

At the end of the day, during **revision of life**, some facets of the theme of the day are highlighted.

We wish to remind all that this tool is but a means of enhancing communion, of strengthening our bonds in the Mennaisian Family so that the time of Advent may help us live fully the mystery of the Incarnation of our Lord.

Fraternally yours,

On-going Formation Animation Team

MENNAISIAN LECTIO DIVINA

You are invited to contemplate once more this scene from the Gospel which we are called to make our own as Mennaisians:

“¹³ People were bringing their little children to him to have him touch them, and the disciples rebuked them for this. ¹⁴ When Jesus noticed it, he was very angry and said, “Let the children come to me and don’t stop them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it.” ¹⁶ Then he took the children in his arms and laying his hands on them, blessed them.” (Mark 10, 13-16)

We discover therein the way to understand the Lectio Divina in keeping with the Mennaisian spirituality.

Jesus is both Word and Master. He is our nourishment while he teaches us how to respond to God’s will.

In his left hand, the Master firmly holds the scroll which contains the will of his Father while his right hand rests with authority on the head of the child and protects him.

Mennaisians are invited, like the Prophet, to nourish themselves of this manna, to assimilate it, not as one would knowledge, but as an inner strength which urges us to be image of Jesus the Master, liberator of the little ones.

Mennaisians come to the Word to contemplate the Master who preaches and makes people free. They are challenged by the Word and discern the best ways to make Christ present among the children and the young people entrusted to them.

This scene recalls how we should welcome the Word of God. The apostles are close to the Word, listening intently. Notice the difference between the fragile scroll in Jesus’ hand and the large book in the arm of the disciple. His hands, heart and spirit are full of other words which prevent him from receiving humbly the good news of the Gospel and to bless and embrace the children.

John Mary invites us to be like children in the presence of God our Father: humbly, with open hands and heart, expecting to receive everything from him.

The angels contemplate the scene.

“ See that you do not despise any of these little ones, for I tell you: their angels in heaven continually see the face of my heavenly Father.” (Mathew 18,10)

“No, no, it shall not be so; upon seeing the multitude of children calling for help, who beg and plead to have pity on them, to pull them from the jaws of death and of eternal death which threaten them, no human force can hold us back; we shall rush to them, we shall embrace them and tell them: Dear children, whom Jesus, our Savior has loved so much, whom he has deigned to embrace and bless, come to us, stay with us; we shall be the guardian angels of your innocence...” (S VII p. 2271)

Mennaisians are called upon to be the guardian angels of the little ones. Their daily Lectio Divina will gradually grant them God's perception of those whom they meet, keep them from everything that might harm those that are beloved by the Father and protect them from the mercenaries who wish to keep the little ones away from Jesus.

Mennaisians adopt the attitude of the angels. Unlike the disciples who are in a hurry and too busy with their personal projects to listen to the Master, angels serenely contemplate him with open arms, eagerly listening to his word.

Thanks to our assiduous meditation of the Word, we become intimate with God and gradually make our own the thoughts and feelings of Jesus.

1st Sunday in Advent

Let not your hearts be weighed down

INTRODUCTION

The mystery of the Incarnation reveals to us the mystery of man, the mystery of God. "Jesus was not compelled to become man because of man's sin, but because it pleased him to do so, out of unconditional love for us. He became man in keeping with the eternal wish of the Father to freely and lovingly meet the expectations of men. It is not man's misery that compels God to become man but God's unfathomable desire of communion" (X. Quinza, sj).

Man's limitations can only be fulfilled in God's infinite being. Other aspirations leave us dissatisfied; they deaden us and harden our heart.

Advent is a time when we are again invited to centre our aspirations on God. For us, Mennaisians, it is a time to continue synchronizing our heart with the motto God Alone.

Luke 21, 25-28.34-36

Then there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth anguish of perplexed nations when they hear the roaring of the sea and its waves. People will faint with fear at the mere thought of what is to come upon the world, for the forces of the universe will be shaken. Now, when you see the first events, stand erect and lift up your heads, for your deliverance is drawing near. Be on your guard; **let not your hearts be weighed down** with a life of pleasure, drunkenness and worldly cares, lest that day catch you suddenly as a trap. For it will come upon all the inhabitants of the whole earth. But **watch at all times and pray**, that you may be able to escape all that is bound to happen and to stand before the Son of Man.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

The last recommendation of Jesus has to do with our way of seeing things in life. Not considering them as serious sins but as seemingly unimportant activities, yet they prevent us from being conscious of the imminent coming of the end of the world.

We should neither be obsessed with terror nor dazed by distractions. The false pursuits of life and the desperate evasions from our fears only tie us down, restraining our freedom and showing us the vanity of all that we crave for. (vv. 34-35). But we know the gift of the Father and we trust that the Son will always be with us.

HELP FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

“Saint Augustine, in a homily on the First Letter of John, describes very beautifully the intimate relationship between prayer and hope. He defines prayer as an exercise of desire. Man was created for greatness—for God himself; he was created to be filled by God. But his heart is too small for the greatness to which it is destined. It must be stretched. “By delaying [his gift], God strengthens our desire; through desire he enlarges our soul and by expanding it he increases its capacity [for receiving him]”. Augustine refers to Saint Paul, who speaks of himself as straining forward to the things that are to come (cf. Phil 3:13). He then uses a very beautiful image to describe this process of enlargement and preparation of the human heart. “Suppose that God wishes to fill you with honey [a symbol of God’s tenderness and goodness]; but if you are full of vinegar, where will you put the honey?” The vessel, that is your heart, must first be enlarged and then cleansed, freed from the vinegar and its taste. This requires hard work and is painful, but in this way alone do we become suited to that for which we are destined [26]. Even if Augustine speaks directly only of our capacity for God, it is nevertheless clear that through this effort by which we are freed from vinegar and the taste of vinegar, not only are we made free for God, but we also become open to others. It is only by becoming children of God, that we can be with our common Father. To pray is not to step outside history and withdraw to our own private corner of happiness. When we pray properly, we undergo a process of inner purification which opens us up to God and thus to our fellow human beings as well. In prayer we must learn what we can truly ask of God—what is worthy of God. We must learn that we cannot pray against others. We must learn that we cannot ask for the superficial and comfortable things that we desire at this moment—that meagre, misplaced hope that leads us away from God. We must learn to purify our desires and our hopes. We must free ourselves from the hidden lies with which we deceive ourselves. God sees through them, and when we come before God, we too are forced to recognize them. “But who can discern his errors? Clear me from hidden faults” prays the Psalmist (Ps 19:12 [18:13]). Failure to recognize my guilt, the illusion of my innocence, does not justify me and does not save me, because I am culpable for the numbness of my conscience and my incapacity to recognize the evil in me for what it is. If God does not exist, perhaps I have to seek refuge in these lies, because there is no one who can forgive me; no one who is the true criterion. Yet my encounter with God awakens my conscience in such a way that it no longer aims at self-justification, and is no longer a mere reflection of me and those of my contemporaries who shape my thinking, but it becomes a capacity for listening to the Good itself.” (Benedict XVI, Spe salvi, 33)

ADVENT WITH JOHN MARY DE LA MENNAIS

(Suggestions for a community meeting)

a. Let not your hearts be weighed down

“Oh! When shall we ever have God as our only support? When will this great God be all to us, absolutely all? Poor sick people that we are, we go to quench our thirst in the small streams of creatures, whilst we have before us that immense ocean, the only one capable, in the infinite abundance of its waters, to quench the thirst that torments us.” A.215. To a friend, about 1811, Ar, 39-592

“Drunkenness, debauchery, life’s worries...” Luke invites us to be on our guard and during this time of Advent to find the reasons for our prevarications which keep us from seeking God. What is our reason for living? How do we satisfy our hunger? What preoccupations keep us from seeing God alone in our lives? To what extent are our excesses obstacles in our wish to slake our thirst for God?

We question ourselves: Sincerely and in truth.

What are the concerns that I should put aside? Frantic activism? Quest of personal well-being? Evasion through means of communication?...

b. Be vigilant and pray always

“Mysticism cannot exist with asceticism; there is no true asceticism if it is not grounded in mysticism. This is what saints tell us and testify to. What is meant by mysticism is the surprising and pleasant discovery of divine Love filling our heart, including through human mediations, and the asceticism which results from this is a spontaneous response to the effective wish to open ourselves to that love and to live by that love for God alone” (Cencini, A.).

As at testing time in Gethsemane, the struggle lasts until dawn. Luke recalls this at the beginning of our Advent. Before the feast of the Incarnation, the Church urges us to lift our heart to God. Will hope strengthen our purpose or shall we fall into the temptation of dispersal brought about by untold frivolities?

Jesus shows us the means to keep alive (mystical dimension) our quest for God: watch and pray (ascetical dimension).

Training ourselves to vigilance and prayer is to move toward one and the same objective, namely internalization and personalization of our lives. It is training against dispersal.

“The more difficult the times, the harder must you watch and pray. Prayer and vigilance are for you the two great means to salvation.” A IV, 141

“Several have perished because they were not on their guard, and forgot this word of our divine Master: watch and pray without ceasing, so that you may not enter into temptation.” A III, 279

“Be on your guard against temptations of despair and discouragement; as I have told you a number of times, they are most dangerous. The best remedy against them is prayer and offering God all of your actions to his greater glory.” To Br. Urban, 13-06-1839

“Try to gather your thoughts, to be more attentive to the presence of God, to be more respectful of times of silence and to avoid all kinds of horseplay: dissipation is your major enemy; you must fight against this daily with renewed courage and zeal.”
To Br. André, 26-12-1823

We question ourselves: sincerely and in truth.

Dispersal (dissipation) drives out the presence of God from our lives. It despoils us from ourselves at the personal, community or apostolic levels.

What helps us (asceticism) at each of these levels to be more recollected and more attentive to the presence of God Alone (mysticism)? Let us share our spiritual experience.

c. We share our thirst for God

(We read this text from John Mary. We pray the psalm together. We observe a time of silence and we then share our personal prayer.)

“Oh! When shall we ever have God as our only support? When will this great God be all to us, absolutely all? Poor sick people that we are, we go to quench our thirst in the small streams of creatures, whilst we have before us that immense ocean, the only one capable, in the infinite abundance of its waters, to quench the thirst that torments us.” A.215. To a friend, about 1811, Ar, 39-592

Psalm 42

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I go and see the face of God?

Day and night my tears have been my food,
as people ask me day after day,
“Where is your God?”

Now as I pour out my soul,
I remember all this –
how I used to lead the faithful
in procession to the house of God,
amid shouts of joy and thanksgiving,
among the feasting throng.

Why are you so downcast, my soul,
why so troubled within me?
Hope in God, for I will praise him again,
my savior and my God.

My soul is downcast when I remember

from these lands of Jordan and Hermon,
“Where are you, small mountain?”

Deep calls to deep as your cataracts thunder;
your waves and torrents have gone over me.

May the Lord bestow his love by day,
by night his song is upon my lips –
a prayer to the God of my life.

I say to God, my rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why do I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”

My whole being suffers in mortal agony,
as my adversaries continually taunt me,
“Where is your God?”

Why are you so downcast, my soul,
why so troubled within me?
Hope in God, for again I will praise him –
my savior and my God.

LECTIO VITAE

“...the promise of Christ, are not only a reality that we await, but a real presence: he is truly the “philosopher” and the “shepherd” who shows us what life is and where it is to be found.” Benedict XVI, Spe Salvi, 8

“If you have an interior spirit, if you recall, that, at each moment, God sees you, and if you seek uniquely to glorify Him by all your actions, none of them will really be unworthy of a religious.” A VI, 5-6

At the end of the day, through revision of life, we examine the thoughts that animate us.

- What moments, what situations, what thoughts distracted me from the presence of God?
- What evasions have I succumbed to today?
- Who helped me be more attentive to the presence of God Alone?

2nd Sunday in Advent

God is coming... prepare the way of the Lord

INTRODUCTION

The time of Advent reminds us that our will to love, to seek and to open ourselves to God's experience is not ours. The initiative comes from Him. It is He who opens us to an encounter. **It is He who comes.** We are sought after, wished for by Him: "The word of God **came upon** John, son of Zachariah, in the desert."

Ours is not to quest but to allow ourselves to be met. "Prepare the ways of the Lord. For this important meeting, man must withdraw. It is the time of asceticism, of purification. Only the man who, having overcome the danger of dispersal due to his possessive instinct, his sensuality, his breakneck activity, his wandering curiosity, and who withdraws within himself is capable of that encounter. However, this wish to enter the inner self is not the exclusive outcome of his effort. It is only after having heard the call of the absolute good that a person can be enticed to enter the innermost recesses of his/her being where the encounter takes place. (Cf. Velasco, Juan Martin, Meeting with God)

Luke 3, 1-6

¹ It was the fifteenth year of the rule of the Emperor Tiberius; Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; Herod ruled over Galilee, his brother Philip ruled over the country of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias over Abilene.

² Annas and Caiaphas were the High Priests at that time when the **word of God came to John**, the son of Zechariah **in the desert.**

³ John proclaimed a baptism for repentant people to obtain forgiveness of sins and he went through the whole country bordering the Jordan River. ⁴ It was just as is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah: listen to this voice crying out in the desert: **prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.** ⁵ **The valleys will be filled and the mountains and hills made low. Everything crooked will be made straight and the rough paths smooth;** ⁶ **and every mortal will see the salvation of God.**

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

"The Word of God provokes salvation **when men allow themselves to be caught by it**, listen to it, love it and obey it... John the Baptist's baptism in the water means the personal decision **to subject one's life entirely to the will of God** and to wait for his forgiveness. The unique and eschatological nature of the event is not central; what counts most is the personal commitment, **the decision that leads to a new reality**, through thought, faith and life. (Bovon, F.)

That word is not heard in the abodes of celebrities (Tiberius, Pilate, Herod) but in the **desert**. This is the empty and uninhabited place where man can face his own reality and that of God. Silence is the appropriate ground where his word can be received. The desert recalls the experience of the Exodus, the moving out of abandon and of slavery for freedom and the service of God. This is where the people formed a community as they overcame difficulties together, shared a common goal, listened to the Word and shared the same food. (Fausti, Silvano)

"Prepare the way of the Lord." What might this mean? What kind of way? Can the Word of God follow such a road? Or must not one **prepare for the Lord a way**

within and straighten and level the path of our heart? Such is the road that the Word of God traveled and by means of which he made his abode in the heart of man.”
Origen, Homilies on the Gospel of Luke, 21.5

HELP FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

“(…) Proclaiming that "God comes" is equivalent, therefore, to simply announcing God himself, through one of his essential and qualifying features: his being the God-who-comes.

Advent calls believers to become aware of this truth and to act accordingly. It rings out as a salutary appeal in the days, weeks and months that repeat: Awaken! Remember that God comes! Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today, now!

The one true God, "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", is not a God who is there in Heaven, unconcerned with us and our history, but he is the-God-who-comes.

He is a Father who never stops thinking of us and, in the extreme respect of our freedom, desires to meet us and visit us; he wants to come, to dwell among us, to stay with us. His "coming" is motivated by the desire to free us from evil and death, from all that prevents our true happiness. God comes to save us.

The Fathers of the Church observe that the "coming" of God - continuous and, as it were, co-natural with his very being - is centered in the two principal comings of Christ: his Incarnation and his glorious return at the end of time (cf. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechesis 15,1: PG 33, 870). The Advent Season lives the whole of this polarity.

In the first days, the accent falls on the expectation of the Lord's Final Coming, as the texts of this evening's celebration demonstrate.

With Christmas approaching, the dominant note instead is on the commemoration of the event at Bethlehem, so that we may recognize it as the "fullness of time".

Between these two "manifested" comings it is possible to identify a third, which St Bernard calls "intermediate" and "hidden", and which occurs in the souls of believers and, as it were, builds a "bridge" between the first and the last coming. "In the first", St Bernard wrote, "Christ was our redemption; in the last coming he will reveal himself to us as our life: in this lies our repose and consolation" (Discourse 5 on Advent, 1).

The archetype for that coming of Christ, which we might call a "spiritual incarnation", is always Mary. Just as the Virgin Mother pondered in her heart on the Word made flesh, so every individual soul and the entire Church are called during their earthly pilgrimage to wait for Christ who comes and to welcome him with faith and love ever new.

The liturgy of Advent thus casts light on how the Church gives voice to our expectation of God, deeply inscribed in the history of humanity; unfortunately, this expectation is often suffocated or is deviated in false directions.

As a Body mystically united to Christ the Head, the Church is a sacrament, that is, a sign and an effective instrument of this waiting for God.

To an extent known to him alone, the Christian community can hasten his Final Coming, helping humanity to go forth to meet the Lord who comes. (...) (Benedict XVI, Advent 2006)

ADVENT WITH JOHN MARY

(Suggestions for a community meeting)

a. The God who comes (Providence)

Our God is the God who comes. He comes in our history, in our times and in our everyday. In the same way that the word comes to John, son of Zachariah, in the desert, it comes (has come – will come) also to meet each one of us in our personal history and our daily reality.

See how the Love of God has worked marvels in your life, how he touched your heart. Spend some time to recall what mysterious ways the Lord has taken (still takes) to come into your life.

“Who among us could give an account of all the means that divine Providence uses to bring people to the truth? **Who will recount the marvels of his grace and how his gentle and merciful hand touches, little by little, our heart**, enlightening it by degrees and making it pass imperceptibly from the darkness of death to the light of eternal life? His operations are so intimate and so varied, that we cannot perceive, much less improve **this mysterious chain**. All that goes on in the secret depth of our heart escapes our notice;... Is it not enough for us to know that he never abandons the ignorant and weak **who only need to be helped and instructed**? Answer to principal objections of atheists (course notes), 53-54, Ar

b. “Prepare the ways of the Lord”.

The attitude of he who awaits the Lord (surrender)

John Mary provides the key for you to live this Advent as openness to an encounter. Open wide your heart, that is your capacity to love and to receive the love of God. Give great care to preparing yourself the best you can to the encounter with the Lord who comes. During revision of life, try adopting the attitude of the “beloved son” rather than that of the “slave”.

“**Broaden your heart**, my very dear daughter, and do not voluntarily let yourself be overwhelmed by excessive sentiments of fear which would shrink your heart and prevent it from tasting God as it should. No doubt, we must tremble before him, humble ourselves; reduce ourselves to nothing in his hands, provided we do not do it like slaves who fear to appear before their master. My daughter, our Master is so good, so indulgent! **The more miserable we feel, the more hurriedly must we throw ourselves at his feet** like that poor woman referred to in the Gospels. Let us kiss the hem of His garment, nay, receive Him deep within us where He wants to come to strengthen us and enrich us with His graces.” To Miss A.Chenu, R 444

c. Let us share our thirst for God

(We read this text from John Mary. We pray the psalm together. We observe a time of silence and we then share our personal prayer.)

“My God, may your will always be mine! I have but one desire, never to place the slightest resistance to what you ask.” To Langrez, 1814

Psalm 127

Unless the Lord builds the house,
in vain do its builders labor.
Unless the Lord guards the city,
in vain does the guard stay awake.

It is in vain that you rise early
and stay up late, putting off your rest,
toiling for your hard-earned bread;
God gives it to his loved ones, and they sleep.

Sons are a gift from the Lord;
the fruit of the womb is a reward.
Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
are the sons of one's youth.

Blessed is the man who has filled
his quiver with arrows of this kind,
their foes will not silence them
when they contend in court.

LECTIO VITAE

“God is a Father who never ceases to think about us and who, while respecting totally our freedom, wishes to meet us and visit with us; he wants to live among us and abide in us. He comes because he wants to free us from evil and death, from everything that harms our happiness. God wants to save us.” (Benedict XVI)

“One thing is certain: the best of all remedies is to gently recline our will in the will of God, whose only thoughts for us are thoughts of peace and whose contemplations of our miserable heart are contemplations of love...” To Bruté, A I 65-67

At the end of the day, let us review our life and the thoughts that have been ours today.

- In what ways **has the Lord come** into my life today?
- Through what events or persons have I seen him come into my desert?
- What word has rendered him present?
- What **paths, hills, ways** in me are still obstacles to my encountering the Lord?

3rd Sunday in Advent

“What are we to do?”

There is a “within” and a “without” in our quest of the Lord. At times, we are attracted within ourselves, in the deepest recesses of our heart, in solitude and seclusion to discern our restraints, to fight our dispersals, to fill in our ruts, to make low our hills, to straighten our deviations, to impose silence..., just standing in the secret presence of

God, relishing his delights to the point of entering his mystery through the mediation of Jesus. He it is who has the key to open and close that door, as he chooses.

At other times, calls come from without, attracted that we are by suffering or the urgency of those in need. We do not for all that distance ourselves from the Lord. On the contrary, we take this course of action eager to respond to his wounded love. We still keep him company as he visits us in the guise of faces and gazes that place demands on us.

Luke 3, 10-18

The people asked him, “**What are we to do?**” 11 And John answered, “If you have two coats, give one to the person who has none; and if you have food, do the same.”

Even tax collectors came to be baptized and asked him, “Master, **what must we do?**” John said to them, “Collect no more than your fixed rate.” People serving as soldiers asked John, “**What about us? What are we to do?**” And he answered, “Don’t take anything by force or threaten the people by denouncing them falsely. Be content with your pay.”

The people were wondering about John’s identity, “Could he be the Messiah?”

Then John answered them, “I baptize you with water, but the one who is coming will do much more: he will baptize you with Holy Spirit and fire. As for me, I am not worthy to untie his sandal. He comes with a winnowing fan to clear his threshing floor and gather the grain into his barn. But the chaff he will burn with fire that never goes out.”

With these and many other words **John announced the Good News to the people.**

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

“John the Baptist responds to each according to his profession, and the response is the same for all: to the Publicans, for instance, they should not ask for more than the fixed rate; to the soldiers, that they take nothing by force or not threaten anyone, for their pay is fixed so that they need not have recourse to plundering and injustices to make a living. These recommendations and others apply to each profession: what is common to all is the call to mercy and its application. It is necessary to each function, at every age, and all must exercise it. Nobody, be it the Publican or the soldier, the peasant or the city-dweller, the rich or the poor can escape this duty. All are asked to give what they have... Mercy is indeed the mother of virtues and so it is proposed to all as the standard of perfection: not to be sparing where clothes and food are concerned. However, mercy itself sets itself limits, given the unpredictability of the human condition: one need not give away everything, but what one has, one shares with the poor.” (Ambrosius, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, 2, 77)

The reaction from the crowd is exemplary. What are we to do? The question implies recognizing the error of our ways, not knowing what we ought to do, willingly accepting God’s guidelines and putting them into practice. John the Baptist sums up the usual steps to conversion: fraternity, justice and solidarity. Jesus will complete the process, proposing himself as model for he, the Son, is the Father’s mercy.

HELP FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

“(…) To an extent known to him alone, the Christian community can hasten his Final Coming, helping humanity to go forth to meet the Lord who comes. And she does this first of all, but not exclusively, with prayer.

Next, essential and inseparable from prayer are "good works", as the prayer for this First Sunday of Advent declares, and in which we ask the Heavenly Father to inspire in us "the desire to go with good works" to Christ who comes.

In this perspective, Advent is particularly suited to being a season lived in communion with all those who - and thanks be to God they are numerous - hope for a more just and a more fraternal world.

In this commitment to justice, people of every nationality and culture, believers and non-believers, can to a certain extent meet. Indeed, they are all inspired by a common desire, even if their motivations are different, for a future of justice and peace.

(…) Let us therefore begin this new Advent - a time granted to us by the Lord of time - by reawakening in our hearts the expectation of the God-who-comes and the hope that his Name will be hallowed, that his Kingdom of justice and peace will come, that his will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.” (Benedict XVI, Advent 2006)

ADVENT WITH JOHN MARY

(Suggestions for a community meeting)

In the light of our Founder’s thoughts and while adapting them to our present circumstances, let us ask ourselves:

- What are we to do to welcome the Lord who comes?
- As Mennaisiens, what are we to do to prepare his coming?
- What must I do personally to show in my life that the Lord is coming?

“As for charity toward our neighbor, and are not children our neighbors, more than all other men? Is it not specially toward them that we are obligated to fulfill in all its perfection the precept of love, of mutual assistance, etc. which Jesus Christ commands to all Christians?” (S VII p. 2367)

*“It is a truth of faith that **Jesus Christ is hungry and thirsty**. It is also a truth of experience that Christians let him die of hunger, and that they do not deign to give him a glass of cold water. Even in eternity, they will still not understand him. Jesus will tell them, and in their astonishment, they will ask him: Domine, quando te vidimus esurientem? My God, that makes me tremble.”* M, 86

“When a priest gives dinner to a priest, I would like both of them to remember that it is the poor ... that it is Jesus Christ who pays. Oh! If at the very moment when dainty morsels of food that have exhausted the most skilful culinary art and the Parish-priest's purse, Jesus Christ, came to say: "I am hungry!" If he asked to be given a piece of bread through pity, all the consciences would blush. Each one would tremble with fear and with shame. It is not a vain supposition for Jesus Christ is hungry. And the ministers of Jesus Christ, who know him and believe him, abandon him, repulse him, forget his needs, think only of satisfying their vanity and their

tastes. They have the infamous courage of leaving him at their door, unsuccessfully begging for the crumbs that fall from their tables. Oh! Faith of our fathers, what has become of you!" M, 90

"My Brothers, work is the most beautiful of all alms giving! Work! That's the secret of Providence; I want to say that it is the means Providence uses to multiply the resources. What better thing can we do than to offer those who lack food the means of acquiring it and a useful occupation? The funds we invest in such a good work soon return. We invest the funds again, and before they are exhausted, they bring relief to several families that would languish in want and perhaps be precipitated into vice without this help. Thus, when we come together, when we understand one another, when we act in concert to utilise the necessary means to produce the best, we do it with certitude and almost without any difficulty."

To the Congregation of the Ladies of Charity, S III, 1072-74

"When I speak of charity I do not mean only the love of God and the neighbour in general. I mean that we must be so united that there reigns among us such perfect agreement that we can truly apply to us this word of St Paul in all its depth: cor unum et anima una. I mean that each one tolerates the infirmities of his brothers, be they of body or mind, with a patience that nothing can alter. Infirmities sive corporum sive animarum patientissime tolerant. I mean that, when one of us suffers, we suffer with him. I mean that each one wills the happiness of the other as his very own. I mean that when one of us needs help or consolation in his tasks, the promptitude and the joy with which we shall render him service evidently mark the depth of tenderness that we have one for another. And finally, I mean that each one be indulgent to the other, and never be irritated or indignant except against ourselves.

But if we love only those who love us, what merit shall we have? The pagans do the same. For our charity to resemble that of Jesus Christ, it must be extended to our enemies, since we have the joy of having some. Oh! How -- useful their persecution will be for us in the order of salvation, if we willed it! That is, if we had the spirit of faith and if we considered those very ones who are, in our opinion, the most unjust as the instruments which God uses to teach us how to serve him without having any recourse to human interest! May they be blessed! And may God grant them all the good they do to us! Let us then be on our guard never to utter a bitter word against them. On all occasions, let us show them that we do not have any other feelings for them except those that are inspired by charity and Christian gratitude." End of the Retreat of the Society of S. Méen, S VIII, 2533-34

d. Let us share our thirst for God

(We read this text from John Mary. We pray the psalm together. We observe a time of silence and we then share our personal prayer. We end by praying together the preface of the 3rd Sunday in Advent)

"What about us? What are we to do?"

*"But, let us say it: we shall never have the necessary zeal to undertake and sustain such a good work unless we are penetrated with the great Christian maxims; **unless we see Jesus Christ hidden** in the rags and tatters which hardly cover the*

wretched. When the rich are firmly convinced that if the poor need their gold to obtain some bread, they themselves need the prayers of the poor to obtain heaven. They thus receive more from them than they give." To the Congregation of the Ladies of Charity, S III, 1072-74

"(...) In a word, are not the dire needs that these poor children have of a Christian education not powerful enough motives to stir up your zeal?" To Br. Ephrem in SDt-Pierre et Miquelon, 21-04-1843' AFIC. 88.01.024

"It is a great good to bring to school all the poor children coming from I don't know where: I rejoice that you manage to clothe them all." To Br. Ambrosius, 9th December 1843

"Even if we had lost the lawsuit, we would not have sent the poor away: they are sacred for us!" To Br. Lucien Deniau, May 15th, 1849

Psalm 112 (111) Praise for the just.

Alleluia!

Blessed is the one who fears the Lord,
who greatly delights in his commands.
His children will be powerful on earth;
the upright's offspring will be blessed.

Wealth and riches are for his family,
there his integrity will remain.
He is for the righteous a light in darkness,
he is kind, merciful and upright.

It will be well with him who lends freely,
who leads a life of justice and honesty.
For the righteous will never be moved;
he will be remembered and loved forever.

He has no fear of evil news,
for his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord.
His heart is confident, he needs not fear,
he shall prevail over his foes at the end.

He gives generously to the poor,
his merits will last forever
and his head will be raised in honor.

The wicked will see this and be furious:
they will gnash their teeth in seething envy.
The desire of the wicked will fail.

Preface III in Advent

Father all-powerful and ever-living God, we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks with hymns and songs of praise. You are the beginning and the end of all

creation, but you have not revealed the day and the hour when Christ, your Son, Lord and Master of history, will appear in power and glory on the clouds of heaven. On this frightful and glorious day, the shape of this world will fade away and a new heaven and a new earth will be born. **The Lord who will then appear in all his glory now comes to us in our days** so that we may receive him in faith and, through love, witness to the hope of his coming kingdom. And so, in the wakeful hope of his coming, with all the choirs of angels and saints, we proclaim your glory and join in their unending hymn of praise.

LECTIO VITAE

To end the day, we place ourselves in the presence of God who has come to visit us and see how we have lived this day.

“The crowd was expecting something”.

What were my concerns today?

What were the main objects of my expectations?

How have I prepared myself for the coming of the Lord?

“What about us? What are we to do?”

What is my answer to that question?

How have I reacted to that question?

John preached the Good News to the people.

Who preached the Good News to me today?

For whom have I been Good News today?

4th Sunday in Advent

Blessed are you who believed...

INTRODUCTION

For the last week in Advent, Mary is contemplated as she begins her Advent journey. She it is who can best teach us to receive the Lord in the manner he has shown us on preceding Sundays.

She is the woman awaiting the fulfilment of the divine promise. She surrenders herself and knows how to discern the signs of God in her life. She is all centred on God and forgetful of herself. In the inner recesses of her heart, she is focused on the source, and distractions that might turn her away from God have no hold on her.

At the same time, she remains open to the encounter with God whom she recognises in those in need. Mary prepares the way of the Lord by hastening to help those in need. No sooner has she heard the call of God than she is on the way.

Luke 1, 39-45

Mary then set out for a town in the Hills of Judah. She entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leapt in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with Holy Spirit, and giving a loud cry, said, "You are most blessed among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! How is it that the mother of my Lord comes to me? The moment your greeting sounded in my ears, the baby within me suddenly leapt for joy. Blessed are you who believed that the Lord's word would come true!"

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

Jesus was born because Mary believed. "Note that Mary did not doubt; she believed, and for this reason she received the fruit of faith". "Blessed are you because you have believed." You also are blessed because you have heard and believed. A soul that believes both conceives and brings forth the Word of God and acknowledges his works. Let Mary's soul be in each of you to proclaim the greatness of the Lord. Let her spirit be in each to rejoice in the Lord. Christ has only one mother in the flesh, but we all bring forth Christ in faith. Every soul receives the Word of God if only it keeps chaste, remaining pure and free from sin, its modesty undefiled." Ambrosius, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 2, 26

"During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste." Mary hastens to visit Elizabeth. What urges her on are neither anxiety nor uncertainty, but joy and the ardent wish to be of service. She is not moved by curiosity, nor does she wish to check things for herself; she believes what has been said about her cousin. Friendship urges her on. Zachariah does not believe and asks for a sign; God gives him no sign and makes him mute. As for Mary, who believes, the truth is revealed to her through Elizabeth. God cannot be received if we do not believe, regardless of the signs that might be given." (Fausti, Silvano)

HELP FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

- Mary **sets out**. She travels in keeping with God's will and design. The expression "**in haste**" emphasizes her obedience. The men and women of the Bible set out as soon as they hear the call from God. The Promised Land consists of hills and valleys and believers travel trusting in the one who called them.
- Mary enters the house and greets Elizabeth. **God accomplishes his salvation by means of human relationships (bonds)**. Greetings are more than good wishes; they produce well-being.
- Elizabeth realizes that God's word and power are at work. **She recognizes that God is ever present in her life and in that of her family.**

ADVENT WITH JOHN MARY

(Suggestions for a community meeting)

When Mary tells us that the Lord has looked upon the lowliness of his handmaiden, she teaches us that her glory ensues from her humility and that if we wish to share in her glory we have to imitate her profound annihilation: "He looked upon his handmaid's lowliness" (Lk 1, 48). True, she received exceptional graces; but it is because she considered herself unworthy that she acquired untold merits before

God. She has no doubt been particularly blessed among all the women whom the Lord has blessed; but it is because she has humbled herself that God has favored more abundantly, honoring her with such an eminent degree of blessedness. Conceived without sin, Mother of the Son of the Most High, the King of Kings, **she walked the simple and ordinary pathways; she persevered in prayer with the other women** as the Scriptures tell us. There are no glorious feats and no wonders in her life; rather **she seeks anonymity and identifies with sinners themselves**, in spite of her dignity and of her innocence, **hence the reason why all generations will call her blessed.**

Can we claim that we belong to those generations referred to by Mary and who will call her blessed, because her life was lived in obscurity and seclusion, because though born of the house of David, humiliations, sufferings, poverty were her lot, because as she humbled herself, God looked upon her with love and mercy?" (Sermon 2, p. 2038)

"During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah." (Luke 1, 39)

"She walked the simple and ordinary pathways." (John Mary de la Mennais)

The Word of God and that of John Mary de la Mennais refer to Mary as the Virgin on a journey. The Advent journey that is coming to an end helps us discern more fittingly with Mary the "simple and ordinary pathways" that lead the Mennaisian to an encounter with Jesus.

1. Let us share in community "the simple and ordinary pathways" which the Virgin teaches us to take.
2. What hills (obstacles, aims, efforts, resolution...) do you feel personally called to climb to be nearer the little ones and thus share and be a happy witness to the action of God?

Let us share our thirst for God

Blessed are you who believed

(We read this text from John Mary. We pray the psalm together. We observe a time of silence and we then share our personal prayer.)

"Mary seeks anonymity and identifies with sinners themselves, in spite of her dignity and innocence, hence the reason why all generations will call her blessed."

Psalm 86

Listen, O Lord, and answer me,
for I am afflicted and needy.
Preserve my life for I am God-fearing;
save your servant who trusts in you.

Have mercy on me, O Lord,

for I cry to you all day.
Bring joy to the soul of your servant,
for you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

You are good and forgiving,
O Lord, caring for those who call on you.
Listen, O Lord, to my prayer,
hear the voice of my pleading.

I call on you in the time of my trouble
for you will answer me.
None is like you among the gods,
your works are beyond compare.

All the nations you have made will come;
they will worship before you, O Lord,
and bring glory to your name.
For you are great, and wonderful are your deeds;
you alone are God.

Teach me, O Lord,
how to walk in your truth,
that my heart may fear your name.

I give thanks to you, O Lord my God;
I will glorify your name forever.

LECTIO VITAE

At the end of this day, we allow the Word to challenge us. We can start by rereading the passage in Luke (1, 39-45) and contemplate for a moment the meeting between Mary and her cousin Elizabeth. God accomplishes and gives salvation through human relationships (bonds).

- On what occasions (meetings, contacts...) have I perceived the action of God in my life today?
- In the words that have been spoken to me, which ones do I see as words of God in my life?
- How thankful have I been for what God has done in me and in others today?
- John Mary asks us: "Can we claim that we belong to those generations, referred to by Mary, who will call her blessed?" Have we traveled the roads that Mary, our mother, has shown to us: those of receptiveness, attentive listening and humble service of the little ones?
- With Féli and John Mary, let us entrust ourselves to the kind attention of our mother:

Most holy and august Virgin, it is by these all-fiery words that one of your most faithful servants consecrates himself entirely to you, as to his mistress, his queen and his mother. I am engulfed in the delightful love of your virginal heart which, with that of your divine Son, who make today, in the celestial abode, his joy, his delight and his

glory. Allow two poor sinners, united less by blood than by the desire to be yours and to uniquely belong to you, and through you to Jesus Christ, to put at your feet this declaration of love and their humble and sweet engagement of an eternal slavery. Accept it, oh great Queen, with your ineffable goodness that is the perpetual admiration of heaven and the consolation of the earth. How we wish we could offer you, oh beloved Mother, something more worthy of you! But, alas! We have only our hearts, our weak and miserable hearts. At least, they are yours without reserve, and we hope that your so tender and so indulgent love will not reject this puny offering of two poor creatures who give and consecrate themselves to you forever, oh, most sweet and most pure Virgin!

Dated June 19, 1809, written in Féli's handwriting, signed by Féli and John Mary, L I, 139-140