

15 DAYS OF PRAYER
WITH
JOHN MARY DE LA MENNAIS

**Founder of the Brothers of Christian Instruction of
Ploërmel
And the Daughters of Providence of Saint-Brieuc**

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15 DAYS OF PRAYER COLLECTION

In tribute to the Brothers who have laboured to make known the life and the spirituality of Father John Mary de la Mennais, mainly Brothers Philippe Friot and Miguel Ángel Merino.

I thank all those who have helped in the preparation of this book, especially Brother Yannick Houssay.

ACRONYMS

GC *General Correspondence*, (7 volumes) compiled by Brother Philippe Friot, and edited by the *Presses Universitaires de Rennes*

MS *Mennaisian Studies*, Review

M *Mémorial*, John Mary de la Mennais

BTR *Booklets on the Teaching of Religion*, John Mary de la Mennais

S *Sermons of John Mary de la Mennais*, (2 volumes) compiled by Bro. Philippe Friot and edited by the *Presses Universitaires de Rennes*

SMA *The Spirituality of A Man of Action*, Bro. Philippe Friot, 1992, En. 1996

MS *Mennaisian Spirituality*, Miguel Ángel Merino and Josu Olabarrieta

JOHN MARY DE LA MENNAIS
(1780 - 1860)

The life of John Mary Robert de la Mennais speaks as much as his writings. He lived in a very unstable environment. During his childhood, King Louis XVI was the reigning monarch. At the end of his life, Napoleon III was the Emperor. Between the two, there was the Revolution, the Empire of Napoleon I, the Restoration of Louis XVIII and Charles X, the Monarchy of July of Louis-Philippe I, and the Second Republic.

Born in 1780 at Saint-Malo, to a family of merchants and ship-owners, he is only 9 years old at the beginning of the revolutionary period. His faith is already steadfast. It is at this time that he discovers God's call and prepares himself for the priesthood with the help of two priests of Saint-Malo, Fathers Angerran and Vielle, who are family friends.

“Essentially, his intellectual education is that of a self-educated person.” (EM 2, p. 12). He is ordained priest at the age of 24, on the 25th February 1804. He is a member of the movement of priests consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, founded by Father de Clorivière. John Mary is in close relationship with Félicité, one of his brothers, two years younger than him. His first years are going to be consecrated to parish work and to educational activities in the town of Saint-Malo.

Struck down by illness at the beginning of 1806, he spends some months in Paris, at the seminary of Saint-Sulpice. Here, he establishes lasting friendly ties with, notably, Bruté de Rémur who has just abandoned a medical career. After his stay in Paris, the two brothers live at La Chesnaie, a secluded property, near Saint-Malo. It is here that they try to recover their good health. In the meantime, they prepare literary works concerning the state of the Church in the aftermath of the Revolution, and precisely, lay down guidelines for the reconstruction of the Church and its unification, and thus assure its implantation in society. It is the notable object of the document written on the 13th of November 1807, entitled “Torrent d'idées vagues”.

From 1809, John Mary keeps a personal diary or journal entitled ‘Mémorial’, in which he records the echoes of his meditations, his resolutions, and his prayer” (EM 15, p. 2). “We can glean from these pages some of the salient themes that mark the spirituality of John Mary de la Mennais... Faith and trust in divine Providence, abandonment to the will of ‘God alone’, and conformity to His Will (art. 2, 7, 13); the contemplation of the mystery of the Cross of Christ, the union with the suffering Jesus in the Garden of Olives (art. 3, 4, 17); and the

submission to the action of the Holy Spirit, light and strength, guide to prayer (art. 1, 8, 11)". The *Mémorial* also shows John Mary's attachment to the word of God. He is particularly attached to meditation on the books of Wisdom and the Prophets, notably Jeremiah". Finally, in this 'intimate journal', we find the spiritual advice addressed, in particular, to Mlle Jollobert de Montville. Here, for instance, he deals with the Father's mercy, the mystery of the Cross, and with humility.

In 1814, the bishop of Saint-Brieuc, Mgr Caffarelli, calls him to be his secretary. He is 34 years old. The bishop passes away soon after, and he runs the diocese for about five years, while waiting for the appointment of a new bishop. Meanwhile, he displays his organisational and administrative talents as well as those of a pastor. This experience certainly prepares him to assume the task of a bishopric, which he refuses, according to his discernment, for rendering a better service to the Church. It is at this juncture that he founds two religious congregations devoted to the education of the children of the peasants, the Brothers of Christian Instruction (in co-operation with Gabriel Deshayes, a curate at Auray, 1819) and the Daughters of Providence (1821).

At the age of 42, in 1822, he becomes the collaborator of the Grand Chaplain of France, a kind of Minister of cults. Far from Brittany, which he knows very well, he holds this function for two years. In 1824, he settles down at Ploërmel where his friend, Father Deshayes has bought a property for the Noviciate. Called to St-Laurent-sur-Sèvre, as Superior of the Monfortain Congregations, the latter leaves the governance and the spiritual direction of the Brothers to John Mary. John Mary carries out his duties by means of annual retreats, frequent visits to the schools, and by regular correspondence with each one of them. During these years, John Mary stays more and more often at Ploërmel. However, he keeps on animating the numerous retreats in the parishes and schools in many parts of Brittany. In addition, he often travels to Paris for business with the Ministries of Marines and of Public Instruction.

In 1825, the bishop of Rennes, Mgr de Lesquen, encourages him to found the Congregation of the Priests of Saint-Méen destined to preaching and teaching in Seminaries. In agreement with his brother Félicité, he widens the objectives of this Institute, which in 1828, becomes the Congregation of Saint Peter. This experience soon becomes heart-rending, and constitutes the principal trial of his life. In 1834, at the age of 54, he suffers from the repercussions of the Pope's condemnation of some of the ideas held by his brother. The Congregation of Saint Peter is dissolved, his brother revolts, and cuts off all relationship with him. John Mary must confront calumny on the part of some of his collaborators and even fears for his other works.

The end of his life is both painful and glorious. Painful due to health problems, especially from 1847, when he suffers an attack of paralysis, which compels him to curtail his activities. Painful because of the death of his brother in 1854, before being reconciled with the Church. Painful still, because of the numerous worries occasioned by the local authorities and the administration of his schools in Brittany and in the Colonies. The distance and the diminution of his strength make him feel powerless to correct or improve such or such a situation despite all his efforts.

Nevertheless, the end of his life is also glorious. Many bishops and eminent priests contact him and ask for his advice in view of founding congregations of teaching Brothers. John Mary, without cutting himself off from his mission in Brittany, encourages any initiatives by services, such as opening his Noviciate to persons who can found other institutions. He also knows how to make his Brothers participate more and more in the responsibilities, thus assuring the smooth transition of governance in the Congregation of the Brothers of Christian Instruction. In 1860, the number of Brothers and Novices is more than 900. The Brothers are established in 300 schools. Those he sends to Martinique, to Guadeloupe, to Guyane, to Senegal or to Tahiti perform remarkably well in the field of evangelisation through education.

John Mary dies on the 16th December 1860, with the sentiment, no doubt, of not having done enough, but also with the peace of one who has lived in the Church with unflinching trust.

THE CHURCH, UNFLINCHING TRUST

Why pray fifteen days with John Mary de la Mennais? What do we expect from such a personage? What is particularly outstanding in his manner of living the Gospel?

Is he particularly knowledgeable, capable of providing us with a solid religious culture? John Mary de la Mennais is a self-taught person who has read much. We can still see his library at Ploërmel. He has a deep knowledge of philosophy and theology. His sermons, recently regrouped in two volumes, are well written, based on the Holy Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers of the Church. They are illustrated with concrete examples, often taken from the lives of the Saints. He has paid in person and in kind to create the Congregation of Saint Peter, a congregation of priests destined for the formation of the clergy by teaching them philosophy, theology, Holy Scriptures and sciences. But he is

always modest in the intellectual domain, and he styles himself, with a pinch of irony, as the “ignorant Breton”.

Is he a priest known to have been particularly enterprising, dynamic and missionary oriented? In Brittany, where he erected many schools run by the Brothers of Christian Instruction, and where he has given many parish retreats, he is well known. He is equally known in the government circles, to the Ministry of Public Instruction, where he goes a hundred and one times to ask for grants or to negotiate legal provisions. He is known to the Ministry of the Marines, after accepting to send some Brothers to the Colonies, in preparation for the emancipation of slaves. In France, as elsewhere, many bishops and priests contact him to help them start teaching congregations. It would, therefore, be an exaggeration to say that the name ‘La Mennais’ is known in France only because of his brother Félicité. However, his care of the Congregations of the Daughters of Providence and the Brothers of Christian Instruction of Ploërmel take up the major part of his life. It is not his reputation that encourages us to pray fifteen days with him.

Is he known at least for his holiness? Is he capable of sharing his enthusiasm for Christ? He died on 26th December 1860, and he is not yet recognised as saint, even though the important stages towards this recognition have so far been successfully completed, and the cause of his beatification is being pursued.

Why this long delay when things go so fast for certain heroes of faith and charity? This would appear unfair, considering the fact that he has always displayed great fidelity to the Church and to the Pope. It is true that he has taken part in many a dispute, and that in the process, he may have hurt some people, in spite of himself. However, he has always been very clear regarding obedience vis-à-vis the Church, even to the extent of suffering, particularly in the case of his brother Félicité whom he loved so much. When he defends himself against certain calumnies, it is again for the good of the Church, by defending the Congregations he had founded. The Church, through the voice of Pope Paul VI, has acknowledged his fidelity by the decree of heroism of his virtues, on the 15th December 1966. John Mary certainly lived as a saint, but the recognition of his holiness is no longer his business.

Here we are, then, in the company of a very approachable Christian, not too learned, not too famous, and not too recognised. This is what he wrote to Mlle Hélène de Lucinière, on the 8th January 1838, “God’s works grow only in the dark, and it is during the night that dew falls from heaven.” We can easily enter into the intimacy of this priest who has cultivated many friendships, and who has accompanied numerous lay youths, religious, and priests in their spiritual journey. To pray is always to be integrated into Christ’s prayer. “Teach us how

to pray”, the disciples ask Jesus (Lk 11:1). And Jesus refers them to the Father; it is through him, with him, and in him that they have to pray to the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. When we propose to pray fifteen days with John Mary de la Mennais, it is because he makes Christ’s prayer his prayer, which is also the prayer of any disciple.

John Mary is convinced of the importance of prayer. Like Saint Paul, in the letter to the Thessalonians 5:17, he recommends constant prayer. This recommendation is addressed to all Christians, whatever their state of life may be. Prayer plunges us into God who lives in our heart, in the bosom of the Trinitarian relationships. *“The mystery of the Holy Trinity is the foundation of the whole of Christianity”* (S 2: 118).

John Mary’s faith, like his action, is Trinitarian. He draws our attention to the necessity of submitting to the generosity of the Father. The Father’s Will is always that of love and of pardon; it is this Will that John Mary chooses to obey. It is manifest in the Son’s attitude of service, which earns him his glorification. John Mary is struck by the obedience of the Son, which leads him, to self-emptying (cf. Ph 2: 5-11). This is the expression of the Father’s conduct (Lk 15: 28), and John Mary strives to imitate him, like Jesus, in communion with His Spirit. The Spirit works through the sacraments, and particularly through the sacrament of reconciliation. This sacrament is of vital importance for John Mary. He makes it the criterion of a successful retreat, since it offers the chance of a genuine conversion.

In this intimate frequentation of the Father, of the Son and of the Spirit, he shows himself as the son of Mary, all-transparent to the mystery of the Trinity. He has never failed to recommend her patronage, and he is always faithful to the recitation of the Rosary.

His Trinitarian life and his attachment to Mary, make his union with God grow throughout life in search of His Kingdom. The strength of his faith manifests itself in the vigorous way he repulses the errors of secularism rampant in France, and shows that a person cannot grow in maturity without God. Often confronted with vexations, and faced with ever increasing meticulously oppressive authorities, like the “Université” (the overall education system), he remains dauntlessly patient and hopeful. Strongly sensitive to friendship, he always builds his relationships in accordance to the Trinitarian communion, without judging persons in a human way. He has the ecclesiastical communion at heart, to the extent of sometimes making painful renunciations.

“God Alone” is his motto. He communicates it to the Congregations he founds. It is not a mere external ideal, but the central thrust of his life, which informs all

his decisions and actions. He gives everything to God, waits for everything from His Providence, and disposes himself entirely to His action in the world.

Through his great compassion towards humanity, he utilises his enterprising temperamental skills to participate in the mission of the Church. He has big plans for her, and envisages the ‘mondialisation’ of Christianity, even before the word becomes vogue. It is particularly by means of education that he evangelises, since, according to him, the education offered by the Church is the formation of the whole person, “the mind, the soul and the body” (cf. Th 5: 23).

Like anyone who consecrates one’s entire life to God, and allows oneself to be configured to Christ, John Mary is purified by fire. But, having sown in tears, he harvests in joy. He takes a big share of suffering (cf. 2 Tm 2: 3), and he lives Gethsemane with unflinching trust. He has a passion for the Church, for her, he undergoes many sufferings, testifying an indefatigable solidarity in every eventuality. In her, he recognised the one whose mission it is to show to man the face of Christ.

A PRAYER AT ALL TIMES

Let us pray without ceasing. But is that possible? What man is capable of constant prayer? Are there not thousands of distractions, thousands of motives, or thousands of obligations, which divert us from it, despite ourselves? It is because you have not understood what prayer is all about, that inarticulate and all-interior prayer, hidden, so to say, in the depth of the heart. Nothing disturbs this prayer, nothing distracts it, neither noise nor occupations, nor business affairs nor sleep. But, in prayer, you see only the movement of the lips, and you would scarcely believe you have prayed if you hear nothing. You ask, how can we pray always? Well, you can as well ask, how can we love always? For prayer is nothing else but love, and love is the most beautiful and the most perfect of prayers (S to the faithful, 2:176).

John Mary de la Mennais is a man of action. When he speaks of ‘noise’, or of ‘business affairs’, he knows well what he is talking about. Where does he find time to pray? He has so much to do! He journeys across Brittany, and sometimes he goes to Paris. He preaches retreats in different parishes, and keeps corresponding with bishops and the superiors of congregations. Besides counselling the Brothers and the Sisters, he organises the schools, and deals with financial and administrative problems. Moreover, he is preoccupied with his Brothers sent to the Colonies, etc.

Where does he find time to pray? When such a question is posed, we think of the time that flies, of the time of the rendezvous we are going to miss. John Mary, himself, does not speak about such a time. He recalls St. Paul’s recommendation, “Pray at all times”, (cf. 1 Th 5: 17). But what time can be envisaged in this case? And how can one engage in “*all-interior prayer*” when everything around us militates against it?

The soul, which is forever preoccupied with external objects, enslaved by the caprices of a limitless sense of curiosity, and by vanity without measure, in a way, lives outside itself (S 1, 680). Without mentioning these obstacles, which are more or less legitimate, John Mary evokes the ‘thousand obligations’, which distract us from the interior life. However, if we are to avoid the “*distractions*” or the “*motives*”, we must be attentive to the daily occupations, to the service we can render, to the practice of our profession ...

Therefore, the constant prayer we are considering here cannot be on the same level, for it would interfere with our attention to ordinary life. There is no contradiction between the interior and exterior life. The two domains co-exist. The *inarticulate* prayer, the *all-interior* prayer, has for its domain ‘the depth of the heart’. This domain is far different from that of the articulated word, although it can serve as its atmosphere, its source or inspirational milieu. It is inaccessible to noise, occupations, affairs and even to sleep. Prayer does not stop even during sleep; it belongs to an order other than that of simple consciousness. It is not counted along with other daily occupations. It is not accessible to ordinary experience. It cannot be described by the movement of lips or by a succession of sounds. Prayer occurs in a secluded place where God alone can have access (cf. Mt 6: 6).

Hence the importance of silence. John Mary recommends it even to children. He takes as a model Saint Bernard, who used to point out that “*all the Saints were great observers of silence*” (S 1:485). If it were favoured by the absence of conversation, the silence referred to here would be quite different. It is not opposed to conversation, since they are not on the same level. This type of silence is more opposed to dissipation than to the spoken word. It can even co-exist with conversation or speech, like any other activity. It is this silence that informs the depth of every action. To hear, to taste, and to feel, one must enter into one’s inner depth. Those who do not practise silence “*live, so to say, outside themselves*”. The silence in question creates the conditions for listening to “*the internal word, which teaches inwardly, and which, following the expression of the prophet, spreads in the depth of the heart like the dew*”.

More than silence, it is “the internal word” that people flee. It is sometimes expressed in “*the interior malaise with which they are tormented in the midst of their worldly pleasures, in those involuntary and vivid impressions, in those secret anxieties that oftentimes perturb them profoundly...*” When John Mary preaches a retreat in a parish, he draws on his personal experience to show God’s concrete action in each of his listeners. He encourages each one to open up his heart. “*Then, what is all this about, if not the action of God in order to convert and save them? That is why then, I say to you all, ‘My brothers, if today you hear the voice of God, harden not your hearts’*” (S 2: 280).

A feeling, an impression, or an anxiety can express the voice of God...There is a spiritual affectivity which constitutes the place of prayer. John Mary himself is surprised by this interior voice, “*How astonishing to find in such a fragile and short-lived creature such thoughts of the infinite and of eternity, which are like the foundation, and the essence of our very being! Poor soul! Who then will satisfy your desires? God, God alone, for he created you for himself!*” (S 1: 194).

Finally, John Mary identifies prayer with love. Beyond the formulas, and the rites, genuine prayer accompanies every interior action, as a loving intention which cannot be deciphered except by signs. The condition of a Christian cannot be conceived outside of a permanent contract with Christ, outside of a deep union with him, as the first of a multitude of brothers. The Christian is a member of Christ in the Church. It is in this permanent interior contact that he becomes aware of his fundamental solidarity with the humanity and the cosmos summed up in Christ.

If deep prayer is beyond formulas and rites, however, we need these to express, support and develop it. Fixed and regular times create the conditions of a kind of spiritual atmosphere in which the rest of the time will be immersed. *“We must be Christian in all our thoughts, in all our actions, and in all our desires. We must be deeply Christian, rooted in Christianity, and it is an illusion to believe that we can be Christian if we neglect all these holy exercises, which alone can nourish in us that lively and animated faith, without which, there is no salvation”* (S 1: 382).

By “exercises”, here, we mean principally meditation on the Word, and the reception of the Sacraments, particularly Reconciliation and Eucharist. *“In order to know Jesus Christ well, we must deepen our knowledge of the Scriptures, and it is He himself who has given us this advice. Above all, we must read and re-read the Gospel of the beloved disciple with a heart filled with ardent faith and love. Every word must be meditated, tasted and relished with delight”* (CG 1:58).

“Let us open the ears of our hearts then so that the word of truth may penetrate us and nourish our soul.” The ears of the heart are not open to speeches, “It is not a speech, there are no words...” says the Psalm. There is but only a light breeze, the symbol of the presence of God, a God who is as powerful as he is gentle. It is this presence that will inform the necessary speeches, notably the readings ceaselessly commented on in the Church. *“Therefore, I would like each of you to obtain a New Testament for yourself and every morning, read at least a few verses if not a chapter ... The word of God has, by itself, a supernatural virtue and its effects are marvellous”* (S 1: 603).

The Word is, above all, the Word of Jesus Christ. The meditation is a contact with Jesus Christ, which finds its summit in the contact with the Body of Christ in Holy Communion. When it is received, the word of God is efficacious by itself; it is dynamism, a remedy. It acts and transforms. It is dew; it is fire, a washing powder. We must let it act in our innermost depth.

Prayer has meaning only when it is a permanent and living relationship of love, a participation in the love of the Son for the Father in the Spirit. A prayer, which has both an individual and universal dimension; that of a Church cell, that of a living stone of the Church.

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
in this hectic life,
keep the innermost part of my being serene and silent.
Send me your Holy Spirit
to inform every one of my actions with love.
Unite this, my aspiration of love, to that of your Son.
Nourish it with his Word and his Body,
and grant that it might embrace all peoples.

IN THE HANDS OF THE FATHER

In baptism, in some way the Father creates us again and we are born a second time. He makes us participate in his nature; we are no longer his enemies. We are of his race, following St. Paul's strong expression (cf. Ga 3: 26). From that moment, He loves us with the same love with which He loves His only Son, begotten before all ages. His goods are our goods. His inheritance is our inheritance. His happiness, His Kingdom, and His glory, will be our share and eternal reward if we strive to be as holy as He Himself is.

But if baptism performs marvellous things in us, if the Father adopts us in Jesus Christ as His children, is it not because He wants us to adore Him in Spirit and in Truth?

If He becomes our Father, does it not follow that we must obey Him in everything, and that all our actions be for His glory? (S 2:225).

Jesus lived all his life in the presence of the Father, always doing His will. He wishes to continue accomplishing it, in and through us, as He wants to pray at every moment. Throughout his life John Mary had but one desire that of fulfilling the Father's will according to his particular vocation. *"To leave God for God"* is one of his expressions that reflect well his permanent determination to enter into the designs of the Father.

What is the will of God? How does it reveal itself to us? It is part of the mystery of God. We know it through the Holy Spirit that Jesus communicates to us. It is He who enables us to go beyond the events of our everyday life and read the signs they contain. To follow the will of God is to enter into the designs of God for humanity. It is to penetrate into the mystery of our being, open to the Father's absolute love manifested in the Son and called by the Spirit who cries in us 'Abba, Father'. All that we do is practically nothing, but buoyed up by this grand design, it takes on an infinite dimension.

Abandonment to the will of God frees us from our own personal project, and disposes us to be available. In his *Mémorial*, John Mary describes what availability is for him. He gives an example: We are very busy, bent on doing something that could be described as a 'good job', and, suddenly, someone comes along with a volley of questions, a long, uninteresting talk, interfering with our work. What is our reaction then? *"You feel a strong emotion; your*

words become hot, so to say, or at least, you give an angry retort to the importunate questioner.” This episode calls for reflection. *“How is it that you lack gentleness?”* He takes us to the cause of such a reaction, *‘you do not know how to leave God, for God himself’; ‘you do not listen to his voice at all’.*” What does this voice tell us? To follow God’s own rhythm, and not allow ourselves to be carried away by our own individual action, forgetting the work of God (cf. M 121-122). This very simple action then, is a good method of reviewing our life enabling us to remain in contact with the will of the Father.

He who surrenders himself to the will of the Father shares the abandonment of Jesus Christ, who finds nourishment in doing his Father’s will. This could be in the form of a *“bitter beverage”*; the will of God is not received in the world, it has no right of abode in that city. However, to abandon oneself to His will is to ensure the peace and the love that heal all the evils, and provide the strength to face them.

John Mary writes to a protégée, *“How painful is your situation! In a way, you cannot possibly move without being torn by thorns. Taste, savour all the sweetness of that bitter beverage that men present you, and remember the lessons and examples that your Saviour has given you”* (CG 1: 157). This *“bitter beverage”* is the love that is thwarted by refusal, the love that is denied expression and thus remains a stranger in the world that rejects it – this world in which each one of us is, oftentimes, the first accomplice. Its bitterness, however, turns to sweetness if the suffering is lived in communion with the Lord, who is meek and humble of heart. God, manifested in Christ, never gives up hope in man. God’s love is for ever and ever. It is dynamism, precisely like that of the resurrection.

Therefore, we better understand the counsels that John Mary gives to his Brothers. Here is what he wrote to Brother Ambroise, *“You make me feel unhappy when you get angry with yourself. I would like to see you more resigned to the holy will of God, and more desirous of conforming yourself to Jesus Christ crucified. You will only have the peace of soul and the taste of joy in your heart in as much as you have these holy dispositions of self-denial and abandonment to God”* (CG 4: 25).

These few lines enable us to gauge the spiritual wisdom of this ‘father’ who knew, so well, how to enlighten the hearts of his ‘children’. Since, for John Mary, seeking God’s will is the joyful seeking of the beloved who wants the joy of the one he loves. We understand well what he means only if we really love God.

At the age of 36, John Mary replaces the bishop of Saint-Brieuc for some years. He writes to one of his friends, *“Hey, you also are feeling a bit down in the dumps! Is it of any use? ...Those who abide in heaven and read the eternal will of God must have great pity on us who read only papers, which are often deceitful and thereby pretend to foresee events and judge Providence (CG 1:377).*

Consequently, John Mary consoles his friend Querret by advising him to distance himself from his worries. It is, in a way, a question of ‘holy’ distance. Whereas the papers strive to stick to the actuality, we cannot judge the impact of the events they report unless we see them from God’s point of view, and that of those who *‘abide in heaven’*. The point of view of the papers is very narrow with regard to faith, nay, too narrow to be capable of seeing events with the eyes of God, to appreciate them in a just measure.

Therefore, the point of view that we must adopt, regarding events in our individual and collective life, is that of the Kingdom of God. It is this point of view that must govern our actions *“Is it for God, solely for God, that we study, that we work? And in our future plans, do we have in mind only the expansion of his reign? Are we disposed sacrifice ourselves for the Church, as Jesus Christ sacrificed himself for her?” (S 2: 31).* The will of the Father is to communicate his life to all peoples. He makes the Church the sacrament of his presence, in continuity with the humanity of Christ. Every cell of the Church (every Christian) has a role to play in the communication of the life of God to all mankind.

Nevertheless, everyone knows that Love is not loved. The accomplishment of the will of God also takes on a painful aspect of sacrifice, but is always joyful in Christ because it is sustained by love. John Mary gives us this beautiful prayer of trust and self-effacement:

“My God, see the state of my soul and deliver it. Here I am in a bottomless abyss, and the tempest has engulfed me in the depths of the waters. Lord, graciously listen to my cry, because your will is compassionate. Cast a favourable look upon me since you are so merciful. Oh my Saviour, who will grant me entrance into this night of faith, where the vain phantoms of self-love and the imagination disappear? Who will pour on my lips some drops of this pure and vivifying water, which eternally flows from the fountain of love? Oh sweet fountain! Fountain of joy, of delight and peace! I see you from far, as through a cloud, and my soul, in spite of my misery, ardently yearn and aspire to plunge and get lost for ever in your ravishing depths. Amen.” (CG 1:141).

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
grant that I may seek to do your will in all things.
Send me your Spirit to make me available.
If I find your will difficult, make me share in the Obedience of your Son.
How I wish He continued to say in me, "Your will be done!"
And, may your Kingdom come through me.

IN THE GLORY OF THE SON - SERVANT

If instead of revealing the birth of the Child Jesus to the shepherds, the Angel had gone to announce it to the great men in Jerusalem, to the rich, to the doctors of Israel, do you think that these would also have been so docile? I imagine hearing them, "What? Interrupt my sleep? Not even waiting for the break of dawn to go to Bethlehem? What imprudence! That would not be reasonable! Tomorrow, we could send a delegation to find out what it is all about. All this is perhaps the illusion of a dream; in doubt, let us not act hurriedly. - Going where? Into a stable! - Why? To adore a baby? - But what proof is there? Any reason? Is that really what the Prophets say?"

Keep on sleeping, great ones of the world, the presumptuous learned! Jesus, my Lord, does not come to be the object of a vain curiosity and to fuel the pride of your endless disputes. Your blind and unbridled self-love, your heart, eaten up by avarice, and tormented by ambition, cannot understand, or still less, taste the poverty, the gentleness and the humility of Jesus Christ, the Saviour. He calls to himself only people who are truly humble. He wants to see around his Crib only the souls that distrust themselves, flexible and docile souls, always ready to believe his word, happy souls that live by obedience and nourish themselves with love (S 1:399).

The objections of the 'great' ones of this world reveal several obstacles to the welcoming of Jesus, **Laziness** (interrupting sleep); **need for security** (wait till dawn); **conformist thinking** (it would not be reasonable); **distrust** (a delegation to investigate); **wait-and-see policy** (there is no hurry); **attachment to certitude** (any proof?); **traditionalism** (what do the Prophets say?). All these attitudes find their way in every generation.

The Son of God, coming into the world, reveals these attitudes and opposes them with his poverty, his gentleness and his humility. *"Only God could speak like that and dare to undertake conquering the world by using the means that would appear to be scandalous. Only God could envisage extreme oppression as a principle of his glory, and say, at the point of death, 'It is now that my reign begins.'* However, this astonishing word became reality; the Cross overcame peoples' pride and overturned their false wisdom" (S 1: 446). According to John Mary, it is humility that characterises the Saviour. He recalls the passage in St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians (2: 6 - 11), "Christ Jesus ... emptied himself".

That marks Christ's whole life. He humbles himself before the Father, and he always does his will. Christ's humility is the humility of the Father (Jn 5: 19). The glory of God, when it takes on a human face, when it becomes incarnate, assumes the traits of service, of abasement, of humble love.

According to the Gospel of St. John, the humility of the Son permits him to be the Truth, that is, the perfect Revelation of the Father. John Mary understands this very well, that is why he emphasises the value of humility. Humility 'conforms' to Christ. *"Humility, self-abasement, self-renunciation pave the way to the identification with Christ"* (cf. MS/SM p.57). The humility of a Christian, like all other virtues, has no meaning except in relation to Christ's humility. It is its continuation. It is not contempt of self, which is rightly stigmatised by today's psychologists. It is a participation in God's humility, the humility of the Father perfectly incarnate in the humility of the Son, which is itself inspired by the humility of the Spirit. *"Without humility no one can have any trait of resemblance with Jesus Christ whose birth, life and death was but one great act of humility"* (S 2: 649).

Humility cannot be cut off from this divine milieu. It is not inspired by some sort of abstract morality. For John Mary it is not the recognition of his nothingness, or discretion vis-à-vis his qualities or he himself. *"In what does it consist then? What idea do we make of it? It does not depend on one action or another, but on pure charity, which strips us entirely of ourselves and put on Christ"* (S 2: 650). Humility is not the result of a philosophical argument. It is not only a human virtue, a fruit of some wisdom acquired through life. Humility is the participation in divine filiation. In humility, we remain in the Son as the Son remains in us (cf. Jn 15: 10).

John Mary's whole life is a prolongation, in his own way, of the abasement of the Son. One of his biographers, Mgr Laveille, makes a striking summary of this point of view, "This man, of noble birth, born to riches, accustomed to dealing with the elite of his time, and, from the start of his career, bearing clerical responsibilities of great import, confined himself in the heart of Brittany, in a secluded countryside and, at the time, was almost inaccessible. There, he surrounded himself with uneducated peasant youths and, at the price of great sacrifices, he set out to instruct them, not to elevate them to his own level and find in them, after some years of effort, men capable of thinking and feeling like him, but to give them the rudimentary training necessary for a rural primary school teacher. Despite his advanced age, in order to carry out this modest role of a catechist and teacher-trainer ... he renounced the most elevated intellectual pursuits, and downgraded himself to the end, at least in his daily tasks, to the extent of calling himself an ("ignorant Breton") (SMA p. 81 / SHA p. 85).

Humility has a missionary dimension, because it is the imitation of Christ. What puts value on Christ's triumph, already accomplished, and which tends to manifest itself more and more, is his humility. When his Brothers ask him, *"Are we not forbidden, therefore, to speak about our own talents, the success of our pupils, the good results we expect in our classes?"*, John Mary replies, *"If you have no humility, you are like mere school teachers."* He intervened in certain concrete circumstances, like the time of the departure of the Brothers to Guadeloupe. He refuses any publicity to be given to such a departure, *"Father Blanc would like the papers to publish the departure of my Brothers for Guadeloupe, I do not want it"* (cf. MS / SM p. 39). Why this obstinate refusal to make himself known, even for a good apostolic initiative?

Apostolic radiance does not depend on the artificial publicity that we can make of such or such an establishment, or of such a congregation. *"All the success of our works will, therefore, depend on the progress we make in humility. And, I do not hesitate to say that it is far better, for us and for the Church, to be humble with limited mind and ideas instead of possessing superior talents and enormous knowledge that would inspire us with presumptuous sentiments"* (S 2: 650).

The coming of the Kingdom is not based on talents either, but rather on transparency with God, a fruit of humility. It is a question of self-effacement, as Christ's, to manifest the presence of the Father. Such is the veritable knowledge of the saints. Some saints had many natural qualities. It is not such qualities that led the Church to declare them saints. It is because they knew how to put those natural qualities at the service of God, until those very qualities finished by blending themselves into the divine work. Thus, some Christians, of little apparent natural endowment, have succeeded to be proclaimed saints by the Church. John Mary never missed the chance of recognising certain Brothers for their devotedness to household chores; in as far as he discerned in them the participation in Christ's humility.

The best service that one can render to the Kingdom of God is to create the conditions conducive to the presence of Christ within oneself and in the Church. For this to happen, one must strip oneself, not of one's natural talents or of one's works, but of all trust in one's talents or one's works. They must, in some way, be immersed in the presence of Christ to touch the hearts. Hence, on the "last day", the day of the revelation of the sons of God, *"the day of the great triumph of the Cross, there will be only the crucified to rejoice, the gentle and humble of heart ... All your works will be judged in accordance to those of the God who, on becoming our Saviour became our model"* (S 1: 446).

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
I thank you for the humility of Jesus.
Through it he was able to manifest himself as your perfect Image.
Deign to make me humble through him and in him.
Give me the strength of your Spirit that I might accept to be among the last.
Thus I will join the humble ones, who are your Church.

THE SPIRIT OF RECONCILIATION

The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to bring light to the blind, to proclaim liberty to captives, release to those in prison, and to announce the Lord's day of reconciliation (cf. Is 61).

At this time, I am fulfilling the order that God himself gives me to announce to you the special favours that he is prepared to shower upon you. For a long time, you have desired and waited impatiently for them, on this happy day of the Lord's reconciliation with his people. You know that in other towns zealous missionaries have performed miracles of conversion ... If we have neither the talents nor the virtue of those men of God ... the desire of your own sanctification and the charity of Jesus Christ do not urge us with less vigour. And ... we have the sweet trust that this retreat will also yield good fruits, that is to say, that the blind will open their eyes to the light, and the captives will not reject the freedom we have come to offer them. If the Lord deigns to speak to you in the bottom of your heart when you hear my voice, you will leave this talk with a firm resolution, already made, to convert immediately (Sermon to the faithful, at the opening of a retreat 2: 321).

The Spirit “unites us to the Father and to the Son”. This is the grace of all the sacraments of which he is the “inexhaustible source”. Among the sacraments, John Mary insists particularly on the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It brings us back to the union of the Father and the Son. As the prodigal son (but also, the elder son), we must “re-enter into ourselves” in order to return to the original union re-created at baptism, but compromised by our sin. It is the work of the Spirit.

During the numerous retreats he animates for children, religious and priests, he never ceases to recommend this Sacrament to them. It is also a privileged time during the retreats he preaches in various parishes. “Sinner, my brother, for twenty, thirty, perhaps forty years, you live in disorder. You groan, and yet you remain there. You say, I am wrong, and the next minute you stupidly fall asleep in your sin. Where does such deplorable recklessness come from? The sole obstacle that prevents you reconciling with yourself by reconciling with God is confession. You lack courage; you cannot resolve to perform this act of humility, without which, there cannot be any pardon for you (S 2:280).

A fervent prayer and a sincere reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation are, for John Mary, the criteria of success for any retreat.

We receive this sacrament thanks to a spiritual attitude rather than to an intellectual exercise. John Mary proposes an example that characterises well the two attitudes, *“In the town of St.-Brieuc where I was giving a retreat some thirty years ago, one of the most distinguished personages of the town (the commissary of the Marines) came and told me that he would confess during the retreat only if I resolved, in a satisfactory manner for him, some difficulties on the concordance between man’s freedom and God’s presence. Sir, I answered him, I would gladly give you the explanations that you ask of me, but it is not the time, for in a quarter of an hour I must be at the parish (St-Michel) to preside over the ceremony of the renewal of the baptismal vows. Please, let us agree on another day. We agreed, but when the day and the hour came I did not see him...”* In fact, that man did not take any step, at least on that occasion. John Mary comments, *He asks me, like Pilate asked Jesus Christ: What is truth? He forgot that in order to understand God, one thing was lacking, that is, for him to be God* (S 2: 284).

This sacrament demands abandoning oneself in one way, in order to find oneself in another. That, no doubt, is the best fruit of the Spirit, for it is the entering into love itself. Receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation presupposes an act of faith in God’s mercy, an act that is no longer in the order of reasoning, even if it is altogether reasonable. We do not confess ourselves to the God of the philosophers and the learned. To encourage his listeners to go to confession, John Mary evokes some experiences of those who have accepted making this decision, his own personal experience, and the hypothetical experience of one who finds oneself in a situation of extreme urgency, in danger of death. Thus the decision of receiving the sacrament of reconciliation is vital. He touches the heart.

John Mary also speaks of the attitude of the priest at the heart of this sacrament. He must efface himself before the mercy of God, being a pure instrument, *“It is necessary that our word falls like dew from heaven on these crippled and hardened souls, soften them little by little, penetrate them gently, so that we can apply, to ourselves, the words St. Paul wrote to the faithful of Thessalonica, ‘I was in your midst, as a mother who caresses her children’*” (S 2: 315). But, whatever the priest’s attitude might be, to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation is to meet with Christ and, in faith, to humbly make an avowal of our faults.

Therefore, how can we explain the resistance to receiving this sacrament? John Mary attributes this to our self-love. We cannot genuinely love ourselves except

in God. To let oneself be purified by God, to find one's way again to one's true vocation, is to practise the true love of self inspired by God. On the other hand, if we yield to our self-love, we only increase the obstacles to reconciliation, "*enchantment of pleasures, dissipation of affairs, and the charms of a false independence*". Father de la Mennais shows himself a psychologist by affirming that time does not arrange anything. It does not, by itself, bring us to an attitude of trust. All that time can produce is "*drowsiness*" and, finally, "*a fatal indifference*" (cf. S: 313).

He also recommends a total avowal of our faults. He often warns against what he calls "*lying to the Holy Spirit*". Failure to acknowledge one's wrongs, to acknowledge them partially, to justify them by all sorts of bad reasons, is tantamount to preventing the Holy Spirit from bringing about the reconciliation in question. Over and above the exceptional action like the avowal of one's faults in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, John Mary recommends a whole attitude of life. This avowal is nothing but the crowning of a trustful dialogue with God.

At the time he reconciles us with God, the Holy Spirit reconciles us with the Church and makes us "*living temples*"; the Church is reborn at every reconciliation. That is why this sacrament appears so important in the eyes of John Mary. To rebuild a parish, a congregation, or a school, he spontaneously had recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the guarantor of a new spirit.

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
send me your Spirit of reconciliation,
He renews all things.
Grant me the courage to acknowledge my sin,
in faith and abandonment.
Let me trust those that your Son instituted
to transmit your pardon.
Heal me of my self-love,
and give me the love of the truth.

TRANSPARENT AS MARY

When Mary tells us that the Lord has looked upon the humility of his servant, she teaches us that she owes her glory only to her abasement. It is true, she received extraordinary graces, but it is by acknowledging her unworthiness that she acquired so many merits before God. She is distinguished by a particular benediction among all women that the Lord has blessed. But it is because she humbled herself most that God favoured her most, and raised her to that eminent degree of honour where you see her.

Conceived without sin, Mother of the Son of the Most High, the King of Kings, she walked through simple and common paths. She persevered in prayer with other women, so the Scripture tells us. We do not notice any glaringly outstanding action in her life, no prodigy. She lives only a hidden life, mixing with sinners, in spite of her dignity and her innocence. That is precisely why all generations will call her blessed.

Can we really say that we belong to these generations of which Mary speaks that will call her blessed because her life was obscure and hidden, because, though born of David's blood, the humiliations, the sufferings, and poverty were her unique share here on earth, because by abasing herself she merited God's particular regard of love and mercy? (S 2: 436).

Mary was totally transparent to the action of the Lord. That is the “merit” John Mary attributes to her. Mary participates in the Word of Jesus about himself, “I have come not to do my will, but the will of Him who sent me.” It is necessary to grasp the meaning of these terms: “humility”, “abasement”, and “unworthiness”. Let us not read, in them, conventional meanings. Let us not see, in them, any idea of contempt of self. How could Mary hold God's work, which she knew she was, in contempt? These terms do not sound really just, except when they are applied to Jesus and Mary alone. Only they practised, to an eminent degree, and in a truly imitable way, what they designate. The terms mean Mary's resolute engagement, in and through Jesus, to abandon herself entirely to the Father's design; to be its perfect expression.

What makes Mary imitable is not the extraordinary graces received, is not the particular benediction of which she was the object, is not her Immaculate Conception or her divine maternity, but the fact that she knew how to efface

herself before all these favours from God. And, by what signs do we recognise this effacement? By the fact that she “*walked along simple and common paths*”, that she prayed “*with the other women*”, that her life was not marked by “*any glaringly outstanding action*”, or by “*any prodigy*”. This effacement manifests well, God’s behaviour perfectly revealed in Jesus. There is a real divine “family atmosphere” between Mother and Son. Mary’s effacement, like that of the Son, permits God to express his humility. This is exactly one of the teachings read in the events that took place at Lourdes (1858). John Mary asks Brother Léobard, the then Headmaster of the school, to give him a detailed account of those events (cf. SMA p.193 / SHA p. 233).

This humility is always in line with God’s relationship to man; the humility of one who comes to ask for the hand of the one he loves. It is God’s humility that runs through the history of the People of God, a history always tending towards God’s nuptials with humanity in an eternal alliance. It inspires those who have written this itinerary of the alliance, it inspires the prophets and the sages. By her effacement, Mary permits God to express his expectations, to solicit trust. Let us think of the father in the parable, who goes out to beg his elder son to enter into the house and rejoice at his brother’s return.

God’s humility, which shows through Mary’s effacement, appears also in the “*humiliations, the sufferings and the poverty*”. Mary, by her effacement, participates in God’s destiny in humanity, He who abased Himself to the extent of being at the mercy of human beings. By her effacement, Mary enters into this abasement. Her ‘assumption’, a participation in Christ’s resurrection, shows to what extent she was conformed to the One to whom she gave birth, by pure grace, up to her Easter.

John Mary founded many congregations of youths and of adults – today one would call them “Faith Groups” or “Movements” – consecrated to Mary. The principal grace, received by one who has recourse to Mary, is that of effacement, of docility to the Holy Spirit. John Mary’s pedagogy is that of trust, abandonment, and availability. “*It holds in its hands the keys of heaven*” (S 1: 510). This trust, this availability is, indeed, the key to all the other virtues that make us conform to her Son. The presence of a “Congregation” in a school like the College of St-Malo (1806) or of St-Brieuc (1816) was enough to transform its spirit and to arouse vocations (cf. SMA p.194-196 / SHA p. 234-236)

Mary is also an educator par excellence. She formed the humanity of Jesus to make it the pure expression of the Person of the Word. To pray to her, is to enter into her mysterious pedagogy, which does not delay in transforming us, without shocks, without any reproach that would only irritate us. John Mary, since his first Communion, never missed a single day of reciting the rosary, in

spite of his numerous occupations (cf. SMA p. 189 / SHA p. 227). He lived his life closely united to Mary, and he had recourse to her before making important decisions or when faced with difficulties like the drama of Félicité (cf. SMA p. 187-188 / SHA p. 226-227). A Brother gives testimony, “One day, in the antechamber of the Minister, we surprised him reciting his Rosary in order to avert the dangers that threatened his schools” (cf. SMA p. 102 / SHA p. 107).

John Mary’s pedagogy consists of gentleness, silence and patience. Moreover John Mary never missed the chance of recommending to the Virgin, those he encountered in retreats, and in various meetings. This holy Mary, who always hastens to favour whatever tends to give glory to her Son, is, at this time, in prayer with us. She already associates herself with our work. She implores the spirit of humility, zeal, obedience, poverty, and sacrifice for us. And, no doubt, if we do not put any obstacle to the efficacy of her prayers, we are sure to obtain the most precious and efficacious graces through her (S 2: 614).

John Mary invariably led all those who entrusted themselves to his ministry to Mary as their Mother and protector. He proposes this prayer to them, inspired by Louis de Blois, a spiritual writer he loves:

“Mother of God, it is therefore true, you are my Mother. Since things are like that, I will approach you with confidence. I will show myself to you, as I am, weak, miserable, a sinner, and therefore, worthy of all the pity from your maternal heart. I will say to my Mother, Oh! Mother, here is your son, do not turn your regard away from him, but rather let tears of commiseration and tenderness fall on your child. Thus, by renewing his soul, they will give him back the peace that is taken away by the feelings of guilt, due to his faults” (cf. SMA p.198 / SHA p. 239).

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
when you crown Mary’s merits,
You crown her proper gifts.
Thank you for Mary’s effacement,
for her total docility to your Spirit,
and for all the children you confided to her in your Son.
Inspire me with the gestures and the words so that
I might become an educator, following Mary’s example.

A FAITH ROOTED IN HUMAN LIFE

My Brothers search with the light of your mind only. Read all the books written by the sages of antiquity and the philosophers of modern times. Consult all peoples, examine and compare their diverse beliefs. Nowhere will you find anything that is not infinitely lacking. Nothing can even be compared to the sublime idea that Faith and its Mysteries give us regarding the Divinity. And why is this? It is because everywhere else, it is people who speak about God, but here it is God who speaks of Himself.

From the knowledge of God, faith leads us to self-knowledge and teaches us what we are and what we must be. Those who pretend to study human nature, I consult and question. They want me to be an animal and a child of chance.

I was searching for truth and they are now telling me that I was pursuing it in vain. I know what I will do. I do not owe my existence to myself. I will address myself to the One who gave it to me! I will tell Him, Oh! God, give me knowledge of what I am; light up my way; let the light of your face shine on your servant. May your truth come to me and console me. Speak, Lord, I am listening (S 2: 120).

God speaks of Himself in the heart of every person wherein human history unfolds. He speaks in a ‘Trinitarian way’; the Father speaks through his Son by the Holy Spirit. “*The Mystery of the Holy Trinity is the foundation on which the whole of Christianity rests*” (S 2: 117). The Father speaks of himself in the Son who himself speaks only of the Father. The Father sends the Spirit who prolongs the Son in the Church and makes the Scriptures known. For man therefore, faith is adhesion with all his being to the Father in the Son and through the Spirit. This adhesion is the sacrifice of one’s will to dominate, it is obedience, and it is finally opening up to the Mystery hidden for centuries.

Faith adopts God’s point of view. By His revelation He makes known to man his origin and his destiny. Anyone who only stops at the scientific knowledge of man tends to make him a simple object open to manipulation, thus reducing him to pure exteriority. What science says of man is a tributary of its hypothesis and, at the point of departure, the instruments that question its object. The philosophical discourse does the same. Their point of view, when based on foundations that are too narrow, ends up reducing man to an animal and confining his destiny to chance. This tendency of man to want to understand

himself by himself, independently of the One who is the source of his being, is precisely the opposite of faith.

God's discourse to man is addressed to his heart. If it is welcomed, it becomes the secret of his dynamism. It leads to love. It is a word in action, which incarnates itself in the events that Christ has inaugurated and his witnesses continue to produce, *"It is time ...to treat philosophy as a despised cause from now on, and to start from the truths of faith as agreed truths and to return to them ... to this beautiful theology of the Fathers of the Church ... to piety itself in its most beautiful sources, Holy Scripture, St. Francis de Sales, etc."* (SMA p. 75 / SHA p. 76). The discourse to man must draw from this source. It is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth must speak.

For that, man's humanity must stop screening that of God. In fact, man must renounce his assumed humanity, a humanity forged by the disobedience and close to inhumanity. He must recover his authentic humanity that of his "first condition", that is to say, to fit in with the intention God had when he created him.

The perfect Christian, the new man, is he whose life is Christ, and Christ crucified. We could say that the "self-abased" man is the man made Christ, the man who becomes the Body of Christ in the Church. He lives his present life in the body, as Paul says, by faith in the Son of God who loved him and delivered Himself for him.

Faith cannot be understood outside the Church. It is lived in the People of God wherein the diverse functions of teaching, discernment and authority are distributed. The Christian who attaches himself to teaching, submits to discernment, and obeys authority finds his genuine identity, since the Holy Spirit who dwells in him is the same in all His manifestations. *"If Jesus Christ is with those to whom he said, 'He who listens to you listens to me', believe it then. And if Jesus Christ is not with them at all, do not believe in Jesus Christ at all, since he has clearly deceived us by promising his Apostles and their legitimate successors help that he does not give them"* (S 2: 478).

Father de la Mennais had to fight against certain ideas of his time that did not take any account of the universality of the Church, of her authority in the prolongation of that of Christ, the sources of her morale. For this purpose, he published two books in collaboration with his brother Féli (1808-1814). In 1817, during the time he replaced the bishop of St-Brieuc, he wrote to the papal representative in Paris, *"One of the grave dangers is to see the civil authority prescribing, to the Church or to one part of the Church, its teaching"* (CG 1: 226).

Faith in Christ implies trust in those he appointed to be the signs of his Word, his pardon and his Body given as food. Faith gives meaning to the Church. It makes us understand the universality at the heart of every person. Place, time, culture, all that is particular finds itself put in perspective when it is a question of manifesting the reality of the Church.

John Mary asked himself how he could revive the Faith after the revolutionary period. In his work of 1808, *“Reflections on the state of the Church in France”*, he recommends retreats, *“If anything could awaken that faith in the hearts at this time, it would no doubt be parish retreats”*. However, for parish retreats to produce the desired effect, faith is necessary, *“And what is required to perform these marvels? Great talents? No, but great faith ... If we only knew what faith can do! If we were animated and directed only by faith! If we only put all our trust and hope in her! ... Then we would see the marvels of the good old days reborn ...”* (cf. SMA p. 76)

He knows very well, however, that a retreat may not be enough. Faith must be maintained. For that we must maintain *“the spirit of recollection which is nothing else but the spirit of faith”* (GC 1: 346). He asks that, daily, we use all the means at our disposal to keep listening to the Holy Spirit; *“Judge all things only in the light of faith and always have eternity in mind”* (cf. SMA p. 71).

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
make me share in your Trinitarian life,
and thus progress in the science of love.
Make me resemble your Son, through the Spirit,
so that I might become a new man.
Grant that I may look at every person
and every event with the eyes of faith,
so that I might see in them your plan of love.

HOPING AGAINST HOPE

Man is impatient to gather the fruits of his labours. He is often aware of the fragility of his being and that all things evade and flee him. He would also like to triumph at once over all the obstacles that are opposed to the realisation of even the holiest of his desires. For doing good, he hurries somehow. With God, things are quite different. He is patient, because he is eternal. He wants that only his hand appears in all his works, and that they bear the character of his eminent wisdom. He moves only by degrees, and he arrives at the end of his projects only when all human hope of seeing them accomplished is completely exhausted. As you know, the Bible offers us numerous examples that confirm this truth. God permits Joseph's brothers, whom he will save, to throw him into the cistern. Similarly, Moses, whom he destined to deliver his people from servitude in Egypt, will be exposed in the reeds on the banks of River Nile in a basket made out of rushes three months after his birth. It is from these extreme situations that God will elevate them to the fullness of glory and make them instruments of his sovereign will. In more ancient times, after having resolved to bless all the nations in Abraham, God waits to announce the birth of Isaac until Sarah has passed the age of bearing even to the extent of her holding this astounding promise in derision (cf. S 2: 507).

Abraham's whole life was founded on hope. He was happy because he was hopeful. God's promise was enough for him; it was as good as fulfilled. He who has hope is happy, for he knows that he possesses something, or that he is already possessed by what he hopes for; he is only waiting for its full realisation or manifestation.

His hope is based on his familiarity with God. God "*is patient because he is eternal*". This is not a mere intellectual affirmation. It is a truth felt, day after day, in the crucible of prayer, on the occasion of multiple signs and multiple disappointments. It is marching to God's own rhythm, which presupposes complete effacement on the part of those who claim to carry out his work. They know that God's work always surpasses any human endeavour, even that of several generations.

Following Abraham, the life of John Mary rests on hope. The discourse he makes at St-Brieuc, at the age of 42, on the occasion of a house destined to accommodate street persons, shows his disposition well on this score, "*What is a house of refuge if not a vast hospital where sick souls take refuge and are housed ... where they recover, not like elsewhere this miserable life which must end soon, but an immortal life...? No doubt, we do not always succeed in*

protecting them from reverting to type, but is the glory of a skilful doctor tarnished ... if it so happens that a man, through his own fault and negligence, fails to follow the treatment prescribed and falls back to his former condition and dies? Can we say that there are no other useful works in the order of salvation, except those where there is always complete success? Therefore, we must reduce the number of these works in our holy ministry, for we often also work in vain” (S 2: 509).

These words are reinforced by the experience of his life. He was prepared to see the work of a whole life ruined, not without suffering, but with a great spirit of faith. In 1835 he was 55. He had invested much in the foundation of a congregation of priests, and there comes the condemnation of certain ideas attributed to his brother, occasioning the ruin of this Congregation. He confides to a lady friend, *“Hope flees before me, I have only prayer remaining; but it is all powerful; it can even change stones into children of Abraham so it was said, and at its humble, gentle voice, the obedient mountains would move from one place to another” (CG 3: 185).*

In his relationship with his brother, he will equally prove himself hoping against hope. Buoyed up by hope, he imagines all sorts of steps he can take to reach his heart. Since he can no longer intervene himself, with many precautions he encourages others to do it on his behalf. When everything ends in a fiasco, he keeps on hoping, *“Judging from what I hear said about the actual state of mind of Féli, I dare not take any step, which if precipitated, would probably not bring about a happy result. However, hoping against hope is the motto of the children of the promise. And I know God is powerful enough to change stones into children of Abraham, Therefore I do not lose all hope ...In confidence, I am going to write to a priest in Paris with whom he has maintained good relationships and to whom he willingly listens...” (GC 3: 312).* Hope gives genuine realism, for it dispels the fear that always has a tendency of deforming reality.

Five years later, in 1840, Féli publishes a pamphlet entitled, *“Le pays et le gouvernement” (The country and the government)*. In court he is condemned to one year in prison, and fined two thousand francs. His brother hopes against hope, *“Now, he is completely abandoned by all his bosom friends! ... Oh, my God, oh my God, have pity on your servant, formerly so faithful, save him in your great mercy! That is our sole hope still remaining” (GC 4: 376).*

In his apostolic activities, his hope is equally put to a test many a time. In 1837, the first group of missionaries he sent to Guadeloupe ends in failure; discouraged, one of the Brothers asks to return to France. The Director, attacked by yellow fever, dies, and two of his confreres defect. Things must be done all

over again. The obstacles do not discourage him and he re-opens the mission, *“I have gone through many similar difficulties before, and none has ever put me off carrying out my resolutions... Read the life of the holy Founders of Congregations and of Missionaries, and learn to imitate their examples...”* GC 5: 60).

In how many situations was his hope put to a test...? Two simple examples: Before opening the boys' school at Loudéac, he had to write thirteen letters to the academic and civil authorities, wait patiently for thirteen months and commit himself financially. When he was drawn into a conflict with the mayor and the sub-prefect of Ploërmel, who had connived together and refused to give the Brothers the certificates of morality necessary for their nomination to head a school, the superior wrote twenty-two letters to the concerned civil authorities during the nine months the affair lasted (cf. SMA p. 102).

For those he forms, he wards off the motives of discouragement. *“Some say, I have many defects and very few talents. Others say our work is still in a state of imperfection, which grieves me. I would like to take such means or such measures to speed up its development and progress. Such depends on this or on that, and I do not see what we are doing about it...”* I would answer, *Are you a person of good will, the will of entirely belonging to God? Go in peace that is what is essential...”*

Hope is rooted in the will of belonging entirely to God. It shares in the hope of Christ whose will was identical to that of the Father. Hope does not change the quality of our defects, nor does it give us new talents, but it allows us to accept ourselves as we are without comparing ourselves to others. It does not change the events either but encourages us to put ourselves at the service of the Kingdom.

“Today, no one can say that what he founded yesterday will flourish the next day! All the wisest precautions taken are constantly disconcerted, and it is at the sound of these thunderstorms that rumble incessantly over our heads that we must march forward to our goal with unalterable calm and unconquerable perseverance” (cf. 2: 608).

Are these reflections not even more true to day?

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing the day of your Son.
Give me your Spirit to keep my heart always open to hope,
And to march to the rhythm of your eternity,
without stopping at the obstacles on the way, and
without discouragement when faced with failures.
Make me a night watchman that never tires of waiting for dawn.

AN IMMENSE DESIRE OF COMMUNION AND UNITY

If our love of the Church is as pure as it is lively, it will preserve us ... from a very common fault; from that miserable jealousy that is the source of all evil and stops a lot of good. We are satisfied only with what we do. We approve, and praise only what the group to which we belong does. We are grieved at the success of others, and sometimes we go as far as creating obstacles because we consider those whom we should see only as collaborators and brothers as competitors and rivals.

Let us have very different ideas; let us have a genuinely Catholic heart. May all those who, like us, work for the expansion of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ be always dear to us. Let us take as much interest in their labours and works as in ours. Let us appreciate all the services they render to our Mother Church. And, if they are happy enough to render her better services than us, far from being aggrieved, let us bless God for that and ask Him to multiply a hundredfold the number of such zealous labourers. Like Moses, let us ask Him to send those whom He has to send. It does not matter whether it is us or others, provided the truth spreads, shines, and illuminates all spirits and the Church is thereby glorified (cf. S 2: 645).

Jealousy has come down through the ages. In Genesis, the serpent inspires, in Eve, the idea that God could be jealous of man and bar him access to knowledge by forbidding him from eating the fruit of the tree. The well known phenomenon of mimetic desires (a desire of an object based on the desire that others have of that same object) often poisons the relationships between people. Works are valuable in as much as they are our proper realisations rather than those of others.

For this, John Mary recommends only a “*truly catholic heart*”. A catholic heart is a heart that appreciates the totality of things, a heart that reconciles unity and diversity. This implies surpassing one’s individual self (me), to take the other into consideration. But it is only He who can achieve unity and assure the promotion of everyone in unity. Nothing is more varied than the members of the Body of Christ; nothing is more diverse than their works in time and space. Yet, nothing is more unified than the Body of Christ vivified by the same Spirit.

John Mary lived this diversity and this unity at all levels, first and foremost in his personal relationships. He evokes this communion of friendship in his relationship with Bruté de Rémur, even when the latter had just embarked for

the United States, *“We held all our thoughts in common, shared the same feelings, and our friendship made us either less bitter or gentler... The charm of our intimate trust spread over our studies, producing an amiable enchantment that is easier felt than explained... our fears, our hopes, our desires, our joys, our sorrows, all merged like streams flowing down the same slope and got lost into a common reservoir. In fact, we finally found ourselves in the infinite reservoir, in the immense ocean, where all created things must be engulfed for ever in God’s love, vaster and more profound than the seas that you have just crossed. We do not regret these small streams, for the great ocean remains there for us, and it is only there that we cannot dread separations. (CG 1: 104).* John Mary does not envisage friendship outside a common relationship with God, who unites friends while respecting their diversity.

In educational relationships, he also practises the pedagogy of friendship. He answers Mgr De Lesquen who wants to entrust a child to him, *“It is necessary for me to know the child in question well. First of all, there must be a relationship of trust, nay, even of friendship between him and me, if that is possible.” (GC 3: 486).* Friendship must always be sought in relationships with the young for it is the sign of God’s love. Love alone is worthy of faith. *“It is by this means that I shall bring him back to the best ideas and to a better life, as I have done for several others.”*

Friendship is capable of subsisting even if there is no reciprocity. This is the case regarding his friendship with his brother when they broke up. He writes to him six years after the break-up, *“I leave Paris with great regret for not having seen you. However, you had no reason to fear that I would have said anything to you that would cause you the least pain. I assure you that nothing in the world will ever change my friendship with you and that, whatever happens, I will always be your most tender and most devoted friend” (GC 4: 310).*

Christian friendship is not put in question by the events or by the intermittence of the heart. It participates in the very love of God for each of His sons. It can even embark on future projects. It is full of tenderness and respect, even for the one who thwarts it. It is patient. It is even capable of dissimulating its attitudes, its regards, through discretion, to avoid any misunderstanding. *“It is our privilege, we Christians, to be invariable in our feelings when we are so in our faith” (CG 3: 516).*

What he lives on the level of personal relationships, he would like to see lived in the Congregations he has founded. *“The spirit of the Congregations must be a spirit of charity and of union” (CG 2: 603).* John Mary is aware of the difficulties to be overcome before arriving at such communion between Brothers, *“It would be absurd to expect that, in a big gathering of men, there*

would never be sick ones. It would be no less absurd to suppose that in a congregation there are no unfortunate characters, regardless of the precautions that might be taken in the choice of the subjects.” However, he maintains this exigency, “Let us love one another as brothers, according to the mind of Christ. Let us follow the advice of the Apostle, that nothing should ever change our peace, our union; it is eternal like God himself.” Is it not by this sign that Christ’s disciples are recognised? “As long as we remain united, we shall be strong and happy; yes, this holy union will be the charm, the grace and the strength of our Society.”

John Mary would also like this communion to be lived in the Church, which amongst the churches and religions, calls itself catholic. It is this concern that is found at the origin of the *“Torrent of Vague Ideas”* (1807), in which he proposes to write a book on the *“return to the catholic, universal unity”*. John Mary immediately understands that an effort on the part of those who claim to represent this unity is necessary for this. They themselves must become more and more *“catholic”* by developing a *“lively faith”*, a *“love of Jesus Christ and Mary”*, and a *“zeal for the glory of God.”*

In view of this renewal, John Mary does not miss pointing out the importance of studies. It is true that they do not suffice to recreate unity, a conversion of hearts is necessary. However, ignorance often contributes to reinforce prejudices. A return to the sources of the faith is necessary for overcoming the misunderstandings that, in hardening, end up becoming errors and creating divisions.

This deepening of the catholic character, while respecting both unity and diversity at the same time, must lead to communion with the Pope, whom Christ designated as guarantor of the unity and an openness to other churches and religions. He had the opportunity to further this communion through the nominations of bishops that he proposed to the Grand Chaplain, M. de Croy, from 1842 to 1824. *“Thus, in a short time, the Grand Chaplaincy ...became in some way the avenue of faith for the Church of France”* (cf. SMA p. 250).

John Mary shows his attachment to communion within the Church in several painful circumstances. In 1821, the Bishop of St-Brieuc thanks him. Later on, the same Bishop interdicts him. In 1834 he is expelled from the Congregation which he co-founded. Each time, without any resentment, he humbly says, *“I have made my profit for eternity from what I used to suffer, desiring, however, that the trial, which was so useful to me in the order of salvation, be shortened, as much as possible, for it makes the Religion suffer”* (GC 2: 172).

If John Mary is attached to communion, it is because he knows that by this sign the world will recognise Christ's disciples. "Community peace, more than a life-style, is the paramount reason for the mission. The community is called upon to signify more than to act, to live more than to announce, to be a living prophecy more than to transmit a message" (cf. MS p. 48). What is true of the religious community is also true of the whole Church, a sign of the world to come where God will be all in all.

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
You have manifested your faithfulness in your Son.
Grant that, by your Spirit, I may remain faithful to all those
whom you have placed on my way.
Widen my friendship to world dimensions.
Make me love those who do not seem to know you.
Give me a spirit of unity so that the world may believe.

Ninth day

'GOD ALONE', PRINCIPLE OF A LIFE

Does it matter whether we are in one place or another on this earth, for which we are not made and where we pass like shadows? Yes, what does it matter? There is no distance for the souls that love each other in Jesus Christ; time has no duration for those to whom eternity belongs.

Let us, then, understand well what we are, what our destiny is. And let us not follow the example of the foolish that put all their hopes in a life, which, so to speak, is already no more. Let us not bother ourselves with what does not merit our attention, even for a single moment. And the saints, did they ever have also such narrow and sad thoughts? Did they not go to the confines of the world when they were called upon to work there for the salvation of souls? Did they not take this statement of Jesus Christ to the letter, "Whoever does not leave his father, his mother, his brothers and his sisters in order to follow me is not worthy of the Kingdom of heaven?" And we who glorify ourselves as being the children of saints, should we try to weaken the maxims that were their rule of life and limit ourselves to a sterile admiration of the great examples they have given us? Let us have them unceasingly before our eyes...

All around us, nothing is stable, and we ourselves change like the rest. Therefore, let us not count on man who is a miserable victim of the most unpredictable events. Let us count on God alone, let us attach ourselves to God alone, desiring nothing but the accomplishment of His holy will, always just, always merciful (S 2: 494).

The motto ‘God Alone’ places us at the heart of the Gospel. John Mary applies this motto when he pronounces these words in February of 1823. He is 42 years old and he has been in Paris for two months. In his eyes, this is disorienting; he feels really lost in this city and he does not know how long it will take. He had been obliged to leave his “*brothers and his sisters*”, two Congregations he had just founded.

Later on, at the age of 66, he was able to write to a Brother about what he himself had experienced, “*Try uplifting your soul then, and remove all earthly affections from it. The attachments to one place rather than to another, the strong feelings of regret about certain human consolations, such are great miseries. Refer everything to God, my dear son, do whatever you have to do in view of eternity. Let that be your only thought (GC 5: 415).*

John Mary unified his life and centred it on ‘God Alone’. He lived this motto as an interior dynamism that made him look at reality with the eyes of Christ himself (cf. MS p. 107). “The experience of God and reality are combined in one and the same life-project. Without the experience of God, the experience of reality would be opaque and different; and without a precise experience of reality the experience of God would be empty and ambiguous” (cf. MS p. 108).

“*The most reasonable person would be the one who would feed one’s mind on one single thought, God alone! - But it is only a Christian heart that listens to this word, God alone!*” (M p. 63). The most reasonable person would be the one who would put his reason at the service of the spirit of faith, and who would attentively listen to the Father. In this sense, Jesus was the most reasonable man, even if he had to suffer the folly of the cross. The will of the Father is to save everyone. This salvation is through the cross because it is based on the refusal to enter into men’s views, which are often too narrow in their individual or collective projects and more or less egoistic. A reasonable person is one who accepts the renunciation of a certain ‘reason’ directed towards the conception of projects, and often conditioned by immediate interest.

The motto ‘God Alone’ implies “the attitude of interior dispossession, of humility, of self-emptying to accept the will of God” (MS p.110), “*Oh! God, I have chosen you for my share, and this share will not be taken away from me; you alone are my only treasure, you alone will be my All always. Life itself is*

nothing, fame is nothing, knowledge is nothing, health is nothing, and wealth is nothing, God alone! God alone! (M p. 90).

It is a question of an act of human wisdom illuminated by divine revelation. It is bringing the renunciation of Christ to life again in us, a renunciation identical to that of the Father, since all that the Son sees the Father doing, he does Himself.

“Configuration to the features of Christ is the most profound source of identity and personal unity. My own features, my most profound identity are reflected in the features of Christ” (MS p.108). John Mary considers his life as an imitation of Christ’s life. *“Jesus Christ’s sacrifice was complete, renunciation of earthly goods, worldly honours, and life’s amenities, from the cradle to Calvary. He renounces his family in order to occupy himself with the interests and the glory of the Father. Above all, he renounces his own will, as we have seen already, ‘Here I am, I come to do your will’. That is what we ought to imitate.”*

He is conscious of the difficulty of this configuration to Christ, *“In a moment of fervour, we think it is easy. But see how few people really give themselves to God without reserve. One has tastes, habits that he does not want to change, because deep down they would cost him much; and because they are not criminal. The other has parents from whom he does not want to separate. A still bigger number would not be bothered by such considerations. But renouncing independence and having no self-will; obeying and obeying again and always; submitting not only one’s actions but also one’s judgement to the will of another person who is more blind, weaker, more miserable perhaps than us; who understands that?”* (S 2: 641).

Obedience is the cornerstone of sacrifice, of baptismal consecration. This is true for every Christian, even if this obedience is eventually diversified into various forms of life. Every Christian must aim at communion with the will of Jesus who always does what pleases the Father. *‘In a word, where are the people, who have no reservations about God; who do not bargain with Him as in a market place, bidding for the lowest prices possible? As for us, my friends, let us give all we have. Let us not try to keep the least part of our will, the least straw; yes, let us give ourselves entirely to God; let us do everything for God; God alone, God alone! God alone in time, God alone in eternity!’* (S 2: 640).

The real sacrifice is that of the will. The Christian must make his will sacred, that is, reserved for God. His will must become that of God Himself, the incarnate will in Christ and in the Apostles and their successors, designated for prolonging his service in the Church.

“Centred on God Alone, considering everything in the light of God’s will, the Brother enjoys the peace that comes from knowing that he is seeking only the will of God at all times” (MS p. 110). “Let us strive to acquire that unalterable serenity, that peace of mind, that gentleness full of peace, joy, love and hope that was promised to those who, elevating themselves above nature and senses, see God and God alone in everything” (cf. GC 1: 143).

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
May my life be all yours, in Jesus, through the Spirit.
Make me so reasonable, even if I pass for a fool in the eyes of humans.
Prompt me to say with Jesus, “I always do what pleases Him,”
And grant that this becomes a reality in my daily living.
Thus I can receive Your Son’s peace.

MAKING ONESELF AVAILABLE TO PROVIDENCE

Providence of God, Oh! Mother that I have invoked so often, Providence always so good, so wise, so full of mercy and love for your poor creatures, we adore you, we bless you, we abandon ourselves to you without reserve. Do with us whatsoever you please. We want nothing else but to accomplish your will in everything, in humiliations, greatness, poverty, riches, health, sickness, life and death.

Oh God, pay no heed to our blind desires, to our indiscreet prayers; provided that we remain in the order that you have established and that we second your designs; and provided that by helping our brothers to save themselves we save ourselves as well. Thus we shall have nothing else to do but to sing a song of thanksgiving. Providence of God, watch over your children, strengthen them, guide them, be their defender, their leader, their light, their counsel, their consolation, their treasure, their joy and their hope; God alone in time, God alone in eternity! (S 2: 493).

When John Mary recited this prayer during a sermon addressed to the Sisters of Providence, he had just gone through a spiritual experience, *“I have not made a greater sacrifice to religion than the one which was imposed on me in that painful circumstance. I sacrificed my tastes, my affections, and my rest. And for compensation and unique consolation, there remains only the intimate feeling of my having accomplished a sacred duty to the Church by renouncing, for her interests and her glory, all that could have made my life gentle and charming”* (S 2: 493).

On the 9th of November 1822, John Mary was appointed General Vicar of the Grand Chaplain of France. On the 22nd of November, he left Saint-Brieuc for Paris. According to him, this was very trying. He lost all his references, all his relationships, all his works, and, in particular, the two Congregations that he had just founded. He comes back to Saint-Brieuc on holiday, arriving in the night of “30th and 31st of January.” John Mary has prevailed over the trial, *“Does it matter whether we are in one place or another on this earth, for which we are not made, and where we pass like shadows? Yes, what does it matter? There is no distance for the souls that love each other in Jesus Christ; time has no duration for those to whom eternity belongs.”* We can say that he abandoned himself to Providence and that it is this Providence that gives him a new appreciation of space and time, no more distance, no more duration. Everything is considered in relation to eternity.

John Mary speaks often of Providence. This is what he wrote in his *Mémorial*, *“I must let myself be devoured by Providence. I do not want to forget this word; I want my whole soul to repeat and repeat it at all times. Yes, I want to let myself be devoured by Providence, I abandon myself, I surrender myself to Providence. I offer no resistance, not even the least movement – that She may devour me! That She may devour me!”* (M p. 85).

The word Providence seems to imply a rather passive attitude on our part. Providence would decide everything in advance and it would appear to be a destiny. It is a word that evokes, among others, the happy events that will come our way or the bad ones from which we shall be spared.

John Mary gives it a totally different dimension, *“It is necessary to let oneself be devoured by Providence.”* There is an engagement on the part of the individual. He could flee... he decides to stay. Providence, it would appear, cannot do anything without human co-operation. On the other hand, there is the verb ‘devour’ – as if Providence was something formidable, “voracious”. Actually, John Mary abandons himself, surrenders himself totally to Providence *“at every moment”*.

What, then, is this devouring Providence that depends on humans? We are far from representing Providence as a kind of goddess of Fortune, a being worlds apart, too powerful, and mastering all destinies. The Providence of God is God Himself, in as much He takes care of his creation because He loves it. On the other hand, we must not represent God to ourselves as someone who manipulates events from the outside in order to assure success of those who serve Him.

Providence appears to be poor, voracious in her poverty, and ready to devour. It is the exact opposite of a rich, powerful and liberal Providence. It makes one call to mind Tagore’s poem depicting a King’s son descending from his chariot and going to meet a beggar by the roadside to beg for alms. The beggar could only give a tiny portion of his pittance, a grain of rice. He regretted later for not having given all that he had, for at the end of the day, he found a grain of gold in place of the grain of rice he had given to the King’s son. So it is the same with Providence, what is not given away is lost.

John Mary thinks more of abandoning himself to Providence than of receiving from her. He understands that we cannot receive from her except by trust, by abandonment. Is it not, however, this abandonment itself, this total self-surrender, this absolute trust, that is the gift of Providence? For such trust, it is necessary to have found the way to the source of one’s being, the source of creation and of grace. It is necessary to follow the humility of the one who

knows that, whatever he might do, come what may, he can do nothing without God's action, which is not of the same order as human actions.

Far from attributing to Providence the role of an automatic distributor, he says, *"Father, do not heed our blind desires, our indiscreet prayers."* The desires are blind and the prayers indiscreet as long as they do not fit into the designs of God. Providence cannot act except in a heart that widens itself through being in contact with the dimensions of the Kingdom.

He applies this very well with a female correspondent, *"In God's hands, a docile and flexible soul does not offer any resistance to the inspirations of grace. It forgets itself, its desires and seeks only the glory of the One it loves. It has a deep conviction of faith in God's action in everything. It sees that it is He who directs all humans and their counsels, from the smallest harassment of household chores to the biggest events that change the face of empires. It is not irritated by contradiction. The constant movements of impatience and resentment do not agitate it. It enjoys a peace that nothing alters. With joy and tenderness, it blesses and adores Providence's designs on it. What it sees and hears can never be a subject of sadness or an occasion of trouble, for indeed God wants it and that is enough"* (GC 1: 142).

For John Mary therefore, abandoning himself to Providence is entering into God's design, slipping into God's will. God's triumph is ensured, since He is the inexhaustible source of all things. He who believes in Providence gives an eternal value to everything. He lives every joyful, painful, radiant, and glorious human experience as Jesus did, with total abandonment to the Father's will. Can Providence have features other than those of the Christ-Servant on the Cross, a perfect image of the One who engendered him? Sharing Christ's destiny in this world, such is the work of Providence.

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
Your Son wants to enrich me with his poverty.
It is by begging for my love like a beggar
that you want to make me participate in your life,
to make me communicate in your Holy Spirit,
and thus become my Providence.

COMPASSION ON A GLOBAL DIMENSION

My brothers, if you had under your eyes the spectacle of a family or a single person at the point of starvation, would you not run to their help with ardour? Well then! It is not a question of an individual or a family, but of entire parishes languishing while waiting for spiritual nourishment. It is the misery of religion; it is the dearth of the sanctuary that becomes more and more profound and deplorable. In a word it is the Prophet's threat whose terrible fulfilment we are seeing; the little children asked for some bread and there was no one to break it for them.

Christians, touched by a pious compassion for such a painful scarcity, nothing will be too costly for you to relieve I; and by consecrating some of your savings to this work of mercy, you will show that faith is still alive in the depths of your souls and that the most unfortunate circumstances, far from being an obstacle to charity, seem to give it new impetus while at the same time increasing its price (Sermon to future priests, S 1: 541).

At the beginning of his *Mémorial*, a collection of thoughts, John Mary, then a young priest, writes, “*Have pity on yourselves and God will have mercy on you. Say, ‘I am guilty.’ And He will say, ‘Come my son and I forgive you. My poor child, come to your Father. His heart will open up to receive you and you will be comfortable in the bosom of your Father!’*” (M p.1). First and foremost, compassion begins at home. This feeling is already an effect of grace for a suffering being; it is tenderness without judgement. It is not a question of having natural pity on oneself, but of participating in the Father's compassion towards oneself. Between ‘self’ and self, there is the Father's love; distance is created, a new self-esteem emerges. The text seems to indicate God's compassion coming after ours, but it is really and truly God's compassion that engenders compassion on oneself. To see one's misery, God's regard is necessary. Compassion spreads from oneself to another, from the other to several others, from several others to the parish and to the district, attaining the whole Church and all peoples.

God's intervention begins with His compassion. We recall God's first words to Moses in the desert, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying for help on account of their taskmasters. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings” (Ex 3:7). Thus Mission flows out of compassion, “*It seems to me, I am hearing a cry of misery rising all around me. Have pity on us, have pity on us, the sick cry out, do not leave us alone with our sorrows. ‘Give us life as you giving us bread!’ cry out the poor. ‘Like Lazarus, we do not ask*

but for your surplus, some crumbs from your table, some leftovers out of your abundance'. You will not close your ears to the groaning of the miserable or your hearts to compassion. You will not be guilty of the death of your brothers. And you will not put yourselves in a situation wherein you will have to render an account to God for their blood, their soul, and for all the excesses caused by their hunger and despair" (S 1: 669).

We find the expression "little children" in Saint John's writings. It expresses tenderness and compassion. Christ's disciple must discern the children's request, since "little children" rarely expresses compassion. But he cannot discern it, except by the grace of compassion. Jesus was animated by this compassion for the crowd of people that had come to meet him. The Christian, then, enters into the compassion of Christ, which, first and foremost, is that of the Father. At the same time he participates in His Mission. It is a question of breaking the bread, of prolonging Jesus' action in the multiplication of the bread and, even more, at the Last Supper, before His Passion. The bread is inseparably the bread of the Word and that of the Body of Christ. It is a double table of the Word and the Eucharist.

Evangelisation by education is a work of mercy. It is really the result of compassion. It flows from the abundance of the heart. It is a heart full of compassion, enriched by the Word and the Body of Christ, which can devote itself to this work of mercy.

The Mission is a responsibility. The excesses come from hunger and despair. The root cause of this hunger and despair is the absence of God. It is not experienced consciously by those who surrender themselves to excesses, but it is felt by the one who is aware of God's presence in himself, finds himself immersed in it and is hopeful. He is then capable of feeling compassion for those who do not experience this presence.

John Mary utilises the image of sickness as another way of expressing compassion. Consequently, he compares the school to a hospital (cf. GC 6: 385). At the beginning of a retreat for youths, he vividly describes an unpleasant scene of the "sick" that he must help, *"On entering this chapel, and casting my eyes on the crowd of young people gathered here, it seems to me I am in a vast hospital"*. The Spirit of Christ inspires his reaction, *"Overcome the secret horror inspired by such a dreadful spectacle and charged, by Jesus Christ himself, with the work of healing these poor cripples ... I approach each one of them and carefully examine their state"* (S 1: 449).

"Let the little children come to me" (Mk 10: 14). "This is the text that struck the heart of John Mary the most, and he made it the focal point of his reading of the

Gospel” (cf. MS p.67). The Lord inspired John Mary with compassion for the children. It is the point of departure for his specific Mission in the Church. *“At the sight of the multitude of children calling us to help them ...no human interest will hold us back. We shall rush to them, we shall hold them in our arms, and we shall tell them, ‘Dear children, whom Jesus our Saviour has loved so much that He deigned to embrace and bless, come to us, stay with us. We shall be the guardian angels of your innocence’ ”* (cf. 2: 538).

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
You manifest your tenderness for me in your Son and in Mary.
You reveal it in your Saints.
May your Spirit inspire me with this same tenderness for all my brothers,
especially the youngest.
Grant that I may bear with love the suffering of all peoples,
most especially those of children and of youth.

Twelfth day

A MISSION OF LOVE

Is it not an admirable thing that, from amidst the European atheism, come these apostolic men who go to expand God’s empire in the New World? The faith is extinguished. No sooner do we see sparks of fire here and there of a dying flame in the depth of the night, than we see tongues of fire going to light up a new conflagration at the other end of the earth that same night. We, who will never see this distant triumph of the cross, sadly weep amidst the ruins. All that we see, all that we foresee, is lamentable. The soul is crushed under the future, and it can hardly find enough strength in itself to sustain it today. But, what good is it to conceal your soul from these sinister ideas? The most pleasant ideas must accompany you on those seas where our heart will follow you and meet again with yours every day in our Divine Masters’ heart that is so good and so incomparably loveable. Oh! You people go away, leave me alone with my God. Why do you abduct my beloved? You do not want to know him, you do not want to love him, let me love him, if it is possible, for me and for yourself. I find all that is not Him distasteful. In Him alone do I find my refreshment and relaxation. Once again, why do you take away my beloved?

My God, give me the hearts of all peoples so that I may love you for all of them. It is not enough. I want to love you still with all the Angels. I want to love you

with Yourself, and as you love Yourself, for you alone can love Yourself as you deserve to be loved” (cf. a letter to his friend Bruté de Rémur on the occasion of his departure for America in 1810, CG 1: 99).

John Mary will soon be 30 years old. He is still a teacher at the College of Saint-Malo. His friend Bruté de Rémur is ready to embark for America. The French Revolution has left its mark on everybody's mind. Napoleon is spreading the influence of the Revolution all over Europe. In this letter, to his intimate friend, John Mary pours out his interior drama. It is not an individual drama. He lives the drama of the whole Church in Europe. It is the drama of atheism. It appears to affect only a small fringe of his contemporaries. Yet he feels that, at least for Europe, the cause could be lost and this evil could spread and worsen.

John Mary adapts himself perfectly to this situation. The love of Christ commands his reaction. First and foremost, it is in Him that he seeks solutions to atheism. What does he find there? His Beloved. He falls back on the Song of Songs. In the place of ideologies, John Mary recommends the presence of the Person of Jesus. He addresses Him directly. He is entirely possessed by this amorous Presence.

When he says, *“Oh! You people go away...”* should we read in this a withdrawal in resentment before a failure or, rather, a reflex of fear? Why does he not seek to dialogue with the atheists? It is not, rather, a reflex of faith before the incredulity of people. He understood that discussions would be useless and that it was necessary for him to rediscover the Lord's presence. It is in the intimate exchanges with his Beloved friend, in the innermost recesses of his heart, that he will find light and strength.

It is in Him that he also finds the dynamism for the Mission. Buoyed by his love for Christ, he speaks to the people of his time. And this love for Christ is, first of all, the very love of Christ for him and for all peoples. *“I want to love you with Yourself, and as You love Yourself”*. He speaks to the people with Christ's love itself. That is the source of his dynamism and zeal for the Mission.

The Mission can begin then. John Mary rejoices at the departure of Bruté, even though it is costly from the affective point of view. If he rejoices, it is not because of the departure. His motivation is purely spiritual. He rejoices at the prospect occasioned by this departure; a new conflagration can be set ablaze. It will be the conflagration of the love of God, borne by a spark ... John Mary stays in Europe, but he does not interpret the departure of his friend as a desertion.

John Mary also has a lot of admiration for St. Francis Xavier's work. But he knows that the mission is not a work of man only, not even the work of an era. *"The almighty God, for whom centuries are like days, does not go there as fast as our desires. And, after two and a half centuries, Christianity still has to grow its taproots in those regions where St. Francis Xavier first lit the conflagration resembling that which precedes the clearing of a savage terrain..."* (cf. S 1: 118). The person who wants to hurry the coming of God's reign is often impatient. He lacks detachment. He wants to see the fruits of his labour immediately. John Mary is overflowing with ideas about the missionary work to be accomplished, but he knows very well that he must move at God's own rhythm.

An expression of John Mary's missionary dynamism is found in the *Torrent of Vague Ideas* written in 1807. It is, in fact, a flood of ideas, a programme drawn up hurriedly in rough handwriting. This document permits us to outline John Mary's concerns, *the return to unity of all religions; a thorough knowledge of the Holy Scriptures; a mastery of biblical languages; a knowledge and practice of a missionary apostolate; exact theology; the maintenance of the authority of the Holy See; the preservation and the extension of religious Orders; Seminaries; the surpassing of fleeting, petty, political conceptions that think only of the extension and development of a particular empire under the sole, limited relationships of this world; commerce, riches, politeness, industry, commodities, etc., and without striving to lead people to their homeland*"; the formation of a teaching body learned in theology, Christian history, and the study of geography ... these are the concerns that will accompany John Mary all his life. It is his own way of concretising the Lord's call.

Therefore it is in personal contact, in intimate dialogue with Jesus Christ, that John Mary found the emancipation of ideologies. That is where he found his personal and ecclesiastical vocation combined. He already had the intuition of St. Teresa of the Child Jesus, and felt himself capable of practising the Church's Mission through living a life hidden in Jesus Christ and Mary, provided it was a life of love.

John Mary is going to put his missionary spirit to good use in the field of education. As a young priest, he teaches in the College of Saint-Malo. As the head of the diocese of Saint-Brieuc, he concerns himself with the education of the youth. His warning against neglecting this domain is also a way of showing how the education of youth is a guarantee of the future of the Church, *"Do you want your children to be brought up without faith, without principles? Do you want them to be told fables and lies right from the cradle? You yourselves, do*

you want to live without religious instruction, without sacraments, without God? Do you want to see the end of ceremonies among yourselves again? Do you want to see deserted churches, empty tabernacles, and religion perish for good in this country for want of priests?” (cf. 1: 541). It is then, in the extremely difficult post-revolutionary context that John Mary embarks on his educational missionary work in pure faith, without any guarantee of success. But, as he writes to Bruté de Rémur on the 18th July 1807, “*My God, perhaps our crimes will force you to allow the wicked to triumph and prevent us from doing good this evening; but, my God, your mercy still gives us the freedom to do good this morning. Oh! My God, we shall do the good this morning, praising your mercy*” (cf. GC: 28).

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
Give me the grace of doing good this morning,
even if I am not sure of doing it this evening.
Impregnate my action with prayer.
Make me consider all my activity as
a mission in your Son.
May your Spirit make me patient and enterprising.
Grant me a spirit of solidarity with the mission of your Church,
especially with the youth.

Thirteenth day

AN EVANGELISING EDUCATION

When we speak of education, we are far from the idea of those who think they have done everything for the child when they have initiated it in arithmetic, in arts, in languages, in natural sciences, and when they have given it the means to satisfy its bodily needs. As if it were sufficient to enlighten the mind and provide for the physical needs of man at the expense of forming his heart to the attitudes of virtue, and teaching him where he comes from, where he is tending to and how to get there. In fact, who does not see that in the midst of the most extensive and most varied sciences, the heart can retain all its weaknesses? It is not enough to strengthen the mind if we do not strengthen the will, if we do not put the youth on guard against the onslaught of passions.

For us, we exclude nothing; the intellect, the heart, and even the bodies of the children are formed in our schools in social habits and in the performance of duties. We do not exclude anything, but we put everything in its place; we know that if we can put aside instruction we cannot leave out morality. Consequently, the teaching of duties must take first place in education.

However, it is a mistake to want morality without religion. Man acts only because he believes and according to what he believes. Human morality is dry and cold. It can show the way but it does not give one the courage to follow. Let us leave this human morality and listen only to evangelical morality, without which, there would neither be good morality nor good education.

But it is not enough to give to a child some vague knowledge of religion that he needs to absorb, it is necessary to make him love and practise it. Well, how much interest would he put into persuading others to follow it if he himself were not fully conversant with it? We cannot speak with conviction except about what we believe, with love except about what we love, with ardour except about what we feel strongly.

At the age of children, the heart opens easily to impressions and we behave more through respect of authority and feeling than through reflection and reasoning (OER in: S 1: 46-47).

John Mary de la Mennais wanted to evangelise through education. “From 1802, when he was still a deacon, the young De La Mennais taught at the ecclesiastical school of Saint-Malo, and put himself at the service of the aspirants to the priesthood, most of whom were materially poor. Later, as Capitular Vicar of the diocese of Saint-Brieuc, he so devoted himself to the education of youth that he became a founder of two teaching congregations” (cf. SMA p. 223). Evangelisation was his first concern. He did not conceive his foundations as a remedy to the State’s shortage of teachers or as an answer to a new sociological context. His intention was evangelical from the start. His concern was the implantation of the Church in the heart of Brittany. Like some of his contemporaries, he had understood that the most solid foundations of the Church could only be established in the hearts of the youth.

John Mary thinks that man’s religious dimension is not optional, not even one dimension among others, and it must mark his development through all his life. In a pamphlet entitled ‘*On Religious education*’, which appeared in 1833, he takes a stand against the underlying philosophy of “*the mutual school*” (Lancaster School) that was strongly recommended at the time, “*We merely consider man as a physical being and not as an intellectual and immortal person who must, while passing on this earth, prepare himself to enter the*

eternal society of God Himself, of whom he is the image” (cf. SMA p.226). Man’s life can really only be understood if it is conceived as coming from God, and it has no meaning unless it goes back to God.

The education given by parents and prolonged by school has three dimensions. They are comparable to the three human dimensions mentioned in St. Paul’s 1st Letter to the Thessalonians, “*the mind, the soul and the body*”. By “body” we must understand not only the body itself, but the entity to which all intellectual knowledge is destined, all culture imparted by the school. The “soul” corresponds to what is said about the heart and the will. The “mind” is man’s spiritual dimension. It is, therefore, an integral education that is envisaged here.

The spiritual dimension is privileged, even if it is the least evident, and even if it is always mentioned last. This dimension is not separated; it has moral implications and repercussions on the social life.

John Mary emphasises the fact that morality cannot do without religion; not a theoretical religion, not a kind of religious culture that remains only at the intellectual level, but a religion that touches the heart. It is only a heart touched by the Gospel that will live morality as “a light yoke” and “a sweet burden”. True morality implies an intimate relationship with Christ. The Law does not disappear (not the “least iota” of the law) but it becomes a sign of an alliance, of profound love. The child understands this spontaneously, because he essentially conducts himself “*by authority and by feeling*”. Whereas power attains only an exterior comportment, authority attains the heart of the person. Morality becomes dynamic when it is inspired by love.

Education has not attained its objective so long as the child or the youth has not internalised the exigencies of divine love. We often deplore his brusque changes in comportment depending on whether he is at home or at school; in the family or on the street ... He has not yet achieved this unity of life, which cannot be attained except by a will inspired by divine love. The realisation of this objective is almost a miracle and yet, the educator must aim at that, whether in the correction of homework, in the explanation of a text, or in the solution of an equation. Always beginning again the same work, of which the educator, no doubt, will never see the end; there are always new pupils, and the year soon flies away.

Above all, education is based on the regard we have for the child or the youth. It is the fact of seeing, in him, a son of God in the making that must inspire all our steps. Then we shall share Christ’s feelings towards him, which are also the feelings of the Father: humility, patience, gentleness, forgiveness of offences, respect, and tenacity. John Mary always advised his Brothers against

authoritarianism, vainglorious desire for knowledge, and, evidently, against brutality. Pedagogy is not only a matter of strategy and tact, in order to be really educational it must draw its dynamism from the spirituality, from the interior life of the educator.

For this, it is necessary that the educator himself be internally penetrated with this relationship to Christ. It must become his nourishment, like that of Christ, which is to do the will of His Father. Then, without his knowledge – for it will always remain a mystery to him – he will emerge with a powerful conviction, a dynamism of love, a warm radiance that will communicate itself to the child or youth. The work of education forms the educator himself and, in the end, demands sanctity of him. *“What holiness will it not exact of you! What strength of faith, what application to prayer, what union with God, what purity of intention, what perfection of obedience, what ardour of zeal!”* (cf. S 2: 525). In wanting to make saints, the educator sanctifies himself.

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
Give me the desire to continue the work of your
Son, Master and Lord.
Make me see your presence in those to whom
you send me.
Following Mary’s example, may I take care of the
body, the soul and the mind of the children
and of the youth.
Make me communicate the love of your Kingdom to the youth
so that they may put your life in the heart of the world.

Fourteenth day

TRUST AT THE HEART OF TRIALS

“Blessed, blessed are those who weep.” These words have a secret charm, a penetrating unction that flows to the depth of the heart and fills it with hope and joy. They could only come from the mouth of a God. It is not man who said, “Blessed are those who weep”. If I ask the sages of this world what I must do to be happy, some invite me to seek the goods of the present, to taste the flower of the season, to cover myself with perfumes, and to crown myself with roses before they wither up. Others assure me that the path of honours and riches is

the only one that leads to happiness. And still others advise me to go with indifference as my companion, if I want to go through this world and its illusions without any troubles or anxiety. But there is none, there is not a single one who tells me, "blessed are those who weep!" It belongs to You and to You alone Lord, to speak like that and to make us find joy in the very bosom of suffering. You alone can teach us to see the precious pledge of our future happiness in the most painful deprivations and most excruciating sorrows (cf. S 2: 410).

John Mary is 54 years old. The Church has just condemned some of the doctrines held by his brother. The former condemns only the doctrines. But general opinion does not always succeed in making the difference. Its judgement is sometimes conditioned by very narrow views or by objectives that are too limited. Consequently, there arise suspicions, exaggerated exigencies of public submission bordering on persecution. John Mary falls victim to press propaganda. If he were the only one affected he would not bother to defend himself against the calumnies, he would rather rejoice at it. But he is responsible for two Congregations that risk suffering the consequences of his unjust discredit. He suffers all the more for being accused of things that he holds in high esteem; his fidelity to the Church and his love for his brother.

John Mary knows how to reconcile suffering and joy, as is evidenced in his letter to Ms. de Lucinière. *"When you wrote to me on the 15th of September, you were far from expecting me being accused publicly, as 'l'Ami de Religion' has done. It is stated that my submission to the judgements of Rome was nothing but hypocritical...*

Thorns prick my soul from all sides; it is nothing but a fresh and bleeding wound. God be blessed! I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise will be on my lips without ceasing ... Like me, you have also sung the canticle of resignation, love and praises amidst the new tribulations that you have just undergone. What a marvellous occasion for us to enrich ourselves and to gather such treasures that rust cannot destroy and thieves cannot take away! Ah! If in his great mercy the Lord deigned to accord to our sufferings what he has denied to our prayers up to now! ...I would tell Him wholeheartedly as St. Theresa, still more, my God, still more! ..." (cf. GC 3: 139).

The two realities are not contradictory in the wake of Christ; we can suffer and bless God. John Mary is aware of the difficulty of sharing this Christian conviction. *"Oh! My God, my efforts will be useless; my words will be vain if the voice of your Son's blood does not make itself heard. Would God that it spoke to the innermost depths of hearts! Let it fill the souls of all the Christians, listening to me, with hope and joy!"* (cf. S 2: 408). It is the voice of Christ

crucified, in the heart of everyone, which can alone give meaning to suffering. He, who is able to reconcile suffering and joy, shows that the Spirit of God has touched him.

John Mary evokes several figures illustrating this beatitude, *"In my tribulations," St. Paul exclaims, "I am overjoyed"* (cf. S 2: 412). This joy is not borne of comfort or pleasure but of the trials and tribulations endured in Christ's name, in communion with Him. Joy is, then, borne of love and attracts love. All God's joy is turned towards the other, all hope is in the other; the hope of seeing him enter this Trinitarian movement of communion where the whole of humanity is called to enter. Joy and suffering, lived in Christ, can go together.

"I hear", said St. Ignatius, "I hear at the bottom of my heart, a voice that repeats ceaselessly, "Ignatius, what are you doing here below?" - Oh! How long will it take me to become Jesus Christ's wheat and be crushed by the teeth of hungry lions!" The amazing force of these proposals reminds us of Christ's desire to be baptised with the baptism of the Cross. *"Suffering or dying was the most ardent desire of St. Theresa's heart."* Jesus Christ asks St. John of the Cross what he wanted to get as a reward for his immense labours. *"Lord", he answered, "grant that I may suffer!"* These should not be regarded as proposals of a neurotic. Let us see them as the fruits of a profound communion with Christ, as a participation in Christ's thirst on the Cross; a thirst of seeing men coming back in the way of friendship with God, the lost paradise. The Christian necessarily participates in this suffering. His suffering is of cosmic dimensions and even affects the whole of creation.

In spirit, St. Francis Xavier sees the persecutions awaiting him in the career he is going to follow and exclaims, *"Still more, my God, still more!"* (cf. S 2: 412). This is a difficult language to understand ... if we do not know that it is not a question of abstract suffering, but Jesus' suffering itself, open to rejection; He came unto his own, and his own did not receive him. The more a Christian suffers for his faith, the more he resembles Christ. In this world the divine exists only crucified because Love is not loved. The Cross is the sign of the authentic divine. Participating in Christ's sufferings is nothing less than participating in His divinity.

Thus John Mary can say to the children, *"May the idea of pretending to condemn you to a dull and sad life vanish from me!"* (cf. S 1: 352). Christian life, in communion with the triune God, has nothing in common with sadness. It makes us communicate with the entire universe. In fact, everything takes on a divine dimension in Christ's resurrection, a manifestation of the Mystery hidden for centuries... The interior presence of God, bringing us closer to those around us, makes us communicate with all other beings. Surely this communion is not

yet entirely realised, as we know. But the fact of communicating with God gives rise to hope; creation aspires to the revelation of the sons of God. He who remains in communion with Christ is not necessarily distracted when contemplating scenery, taking an interest in conquering space, or calculating imaginary numbers. He can cover all that in one sense – a presence. He can turn all that into an expression of love.

Joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit and pure consciences taste it with delight and more fully than anyone else. See, for example, St. Francis de Sales, he was charming in his relationships. We cannot, at all, imagine a gentler and loving companionship than his (cf. S: 352). Francis de Sales was a model for John Mary. We can think he incarnated this model himself. We see him cracking jokes in his letters, especially with his friends. It is not only a question of temperament. The peace, the relaxation and the certitude that intimate contact with truth procure are the factors of joy.

John Mary lived St. Paul's words, "I was resolved that the only knowledge I would have while I was with you was knowledge of Jesus and of him as the crucified Christ" (1 Co 2: 2). He put all his hope in the Cross. Thus the dynamism of his life, in the service of the Church, is understandable.

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
When trials and tribulations knock at my door,
or that of my brothers,
remind me of Gethsemane.
Let the Spirit of love abide in my sufferings.
The saints knew how to transform their sufferings into joy;
reveal their secret to me.
Make me radiate joy to all around me,
amidst our common trials.

Fifteenth day

A PASSIONATE LOVE FOR THE CHURCH

We must love the Church as we love Jesus Christ. It is His spouse and, together, they make but one body and one flesh. We must love it with all our heart, with all our will and with all our strength... May all our actions be orientated

towards its glory. Let this be our sole aim and let nothing on earth turn us away from it. Let us imitate Jesus Christ who, as St. Paul tells us, so loved the Church that he delivered himself for it. Let us think only of the Church. Let us see nothing on earth but the Church. Let all the rest disappear from our sight in our conversations, preaching, and studies. Let us not propose to ourselves anything else except the Church's glory, in as far as it depend on us ... (cf. 2: 646).

We must love the Church. On what grounds? On what basis does it merit our love?

John Mary answers these questions by referring us to Christ's mystery. "According to John Mary de la Mennais, his love of Christ was not different from his love of the Church. His apostolic zeal was its best expression, and his efforts in founding religious congregations prolong his personal commitment to the service of God's Kingdom beyond his life span. We can affirm that his passionate love of the Church was the overriding theme of all his activity. This feeling ... overflowed from his heart in his talks; Ah! How I love the Church! Oh! How beautiful our mother Church is! For her I want to live, fight and die!" (cf. SMA p. 241).

Inhabited by Jesus Christ, Father de la Mennais is also inhabited by the Church. Christ is, in fact, but "one body and one flesh" with the Church. It is the assembly of Jesus Christ's followers communicating in his Word and in his Body. The Christian is not lost in the middle of a crowd of disciples, since, in a certain way, he contains it. He somehow knows each of its members in Jesus Christ, even if he finds himself isolated due to the factors of time and space. He is even a unique expression of this multitude of followers.

A Christian cannot consider the Church as an outsider since it is his own flesh, hence his fundamental solidarity with it. In his answer to Bruté de Rémur, who announces his departure for America, John Mary writes, "*I am not afraid for her (the Church of France) persecution by the sword, but her persecution through indifference on the part of her own children, and even of some of her own ministers*" (cf. GC 1: 327). A Christian wants the Church to live, to manifest herself to each person and become the flesh of her flesh. A Christian cannot question the Church's fidelity to Christ without compromising himself, for he is called upon to be entirely of the Church.

That is why the heart, will, and energies of John Mary de la Mennais are impregnated with this ecclesiastical reality. His life is intermingled with that of the Church, in the time and space in which he lived. For example, he defends the Church when the civil authorities encroach upon her rights in the nomination of bishops. He defends her radiance by his concern for the

formation of future priests in the Seminaries. He defends her universality by affirming the Pope's authority. He toils for her expansion by participating in the erection of schools and in the Church's struggle for the emancipation of slaves. "By his counsels and direct action he helped the founders of other congregations whose concerns were similar to his own. This meant he was in contact with more than thirty-five French dioceses, and at least a dozen dioceses in eight foreign countries of Europe and America" (cf. SMA p. 253).

For a Christian, loving the Church is loving oneself. It is loving oneself as the body of Christ, as an integral part of the communion of human beings with Christ. Trusting the Church is trusting oneself, not as an isolated individual, but as a member of the communion of the faithful. The love of the Church, therefore, represents a blossoming for the Christian; he identifies his destiny with that of the Church. The war he wages for her is a war that has taken place in him already. If he has to complain, it is because he is not yet entirely Church, not entirely of Christ.

"Let us think only of her, let us see only her on earth. May the rest disappear from our sight" (cf. S 2: 645). The Christian, who is really inhabited by the Church, who is a living stone of the Church, does not waste his time imagining what she is, still much less criticising her, for he is not a kingdom divided against himself. He espouses her cause, and communicates very profoundly with her. Thus the Church becomes a dynamic principle in each of her members. That is why she produces enthusiasm of heart, strength of will, and deployment of all the forces in those who really receive her. Developing a Church attitude is, therefore, following a force coming from the innermost depths of oneself. A force that makes all those, who live the same thing, stick together, a force that is universal and yet unique – a "catholic" force. The love of the Church is not the love of an exterior reality, but the entrance into an interior dynamism inspired by the Spirit, who identifies us to Christ and pushes us to do the Father's will.

The sense of the Church demands a communal spirit on the part of each of her members. The Church is an expression of the Trinity. "When we affirm and respect the differences and the plurality among men, we confess, in a practical way, the Trinitarian distinction of Persons. When we eliminate distances and work for real equality between man and woman, rich or poor, near or far, we affirm the equality of the Trinitarian Persons by our works. When we strive to have but "one heart and one soul" and we know how to put everything in common so that no one is in need, we confess the one God and we welcome His Trinitarian life in us" (cf. MS p. 22).

Evidently, he who enters into this dynamic encounters all the interior and exterior obstacles that delay the coming of the Kingdom. It is never the Church, as such, that is the obstacle, most of the time it is the individual or collective “me”. It resists and opposes communion. The way of combating this is to trust the Church. Discernment is necessary, but it can only come about through prayer and humility, and always out of concern for communion.

Concretely, the love of the Church manifests itself in the desire to see the latter establishing herself in everyone. It is, therefore, a missionary love filled with hope. It aims at making everyone feel he is not alone. It wants to reveal, to every human person, this communion of which he must be aware, since it already inhabits him. It wants to participate in God’s patience, a patience made of waiting and suffering. It also participates in all creation’s waiting for the revelation of the sons of God.

Therefore having a Church attitude is within the reach of all; if it is true that God gives his grace to whoever trusts him. The more the Christian puts himself in God’s hands, the more he becomes Church and participates in her destiny. He can say like John Mary, *“I have come ... to serve the Church at the expense of my health and my relaxation, at the expense of my life itself. I have no other desire and no other will”* (cf. S 2: 646).

Praying in communion with John Mary

Father,
With your Son’s Church, your Kingdom has begun.
Give me the awareness of being this Church,
to participate in her adventure.
Grant that, by your Spirit, I may espouse her destiny.
Thank you for your Church,
the sacrament of your Trinitarian life.
May she be more and more herself so that
all peoples may feel attracted to her.

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