

A LEBANESE LASALLIAN DESCRIBES A YEAR LONG REFRESHER COURSE IN PARIS

After teaching the Arts and Religion for 12 years and spending a year as an inspector to enable Brother Lopez to go to CIL, I was offered a chance by Brother Bernard, the headmaster, to go for a refresher course in France. He told me, as did the Visitor, Brother Ildefonse Marie, that I ‘had to make the most of this year’ to study to make myself a more efficient Lasallian teacher by following courses at the Institut Catholique, as well as by finding out what was currently being done in the Brothers’ schools at Regional level in France.

I left for France at the end of August and was given a warm welcome at 78A rue de Sèvres in spite of the fact I had not been able to make prior arrangements owing to the situation back in my own country. The house does not normally cater for long-term stays and so my plan to stay for a whole year made it awkward for the Brother Director, in spite of his understanding nature. He had any number of similar requests from French Districts. However, a helping hand from Brother Patrice and the support of the Regional Co-ordinator overcame all problems, gave me a fixed address and enabled me to obtain a residency permit.

As the year went by I became more and more convinced of the advantages of staying at the Rue de Sèvres. It was not only the geographical advantages, like being near the Institut Catholique, the Sevres Centre, the Rue du Bac; but also and mainly the spiritual and Lasallian ones. The Office, Mass, the library and the archives, the family atmosphere at meal times, feastsdays, birthdays, community meetings, the presence of Brothers like the Regional Co-ordinator, the Visitor, the Secretary for Education were so many complementary elements in a situation which was enriching and made for lasting friendships and a clearer vision. Another great advantage was the never ending series of Lasallian sessions, meetings and days which tended to take place there; and the constant coming and going of visiting Brothers not only from all over France, but from all over the world. Exchanging information and experiences with these Brothers was a real bonus, for it enabled me to discover what was going on in the Institute the world over. Meetings of the members of the La Salle Association or of the French Lasallian Federation were so many occasions to get to know people and to become involved in discussions and exchanges of information in the context of the close collaboration of Brothers and lay people in France.

AMONG THE BROTHERS IN FRANCE

As everywhere else in the western world, the lack of vocations and ageing are sad to see... But one can feel also that there is a renewal and the dawning of better tomorrows can be glimpsed. New vocations, although few in number, augur well for the quality of our future Brothers. The new spirit which can be felt in the Church in France makes for deeper commitments, offers greater challenges to the generosity of young people, makes it possible for them to live out their consecration in ways that are more efficient and better adapted to the needs of the times. These ways which are better adapted to the needs of the present day world are what the Founder envisaged when he saw that a school was the ideal place for evangelisation. There is a need everywhere for a re-foundation: it has to be lived before it can become institutionalised in texts.

In the schools which I visited (Charonne, Buzenval, Avignon, Auxerre, Romilly, Garges-les-Gonesse) and those whose Brothers or lay headmasters I met, the takeover or collaboration, as the case may be, is going very smoothly wherever the ground has been prepared. I was very edified by the religious conviction and commitment of the lay headmasters, and I learned a lot from them. Where there is still a community of Brothers, they and parents fight to save it. When the Brothers are no longer there, they try as Lasallian trustees to inspire an outlook on life and an approach to faith in the school. Thanks to these lay people (and to former students) most of the schools and property of the Institute have been saved or recovered. Thanks to their enthusiasm and persistence also, there has come about a demand for initiation into Lasallian spirituality; and even the Superiors admit that the collaboration of Brothers and lay people has led them to look for more permanent structures in Signum Fidei or some other framework which will be a living sign of the commitment of educators within the Institute. Everywhere research is going on, experiments are being planned or made in the whole area of Lasallian Trusteeship, reception, information, training and collaboration.

There is a prevalent feeling all round that what is happening is a process which complements and does not substitute: Brothers and lay people continue “together and by association” the work of St. John Baptist de La Salle, each respecting the other’s ministry or vocation-charism. As in the case of the position of the lay people in the Church, this is not an interim or temporary solution. It is true that there are Brothers who do not believe that this is happening, and many despair that there will be anyone to take over from them. Others have taken on the role of “Institute gravediggers” by their intransigent negative attitude. It is quite true that the majority of teachers are not involved, but the Lasallian core group is slowly growing and spreading. What I admired most was the optimism and determination of the Superiors who believe in the future, are preparing for it with confidence and joy, and work with a view “to associate lay people with their educational mission... and to contribute to the promotion of the Christian laity, especially among educators”.

Mr Elie Austat.