

CELEBRATING EASTER WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

The experience.

The experience I am going to describe could just as easily have been recounted by any number of Brothers who have taken part in or organised similar events. It is worth noting at this point that this is not something only the Brothers have organised: there are a great many people involved with youth work who celebrate Easter very fervently with their youngsters. Begun by the Salesians and the Marists, and inspired by Taizé, this way of celebrating Easter has acquired through a fair amount of experimentation characteristics which distinguish it from all other approaches. This is not to say that there were no difficulties, nor that it was not necessary to separate the grain from the chaff. We moved from the early mass celebrations of Easter which, at times, were more like big friendly youth jamborees than anything else, to celebrations where numbers were restricted to young people who belonged to groups or communities seeking to deepen their faith. Whereas formerly the celebration of Easter was an isolated event, now it has become an element in a process which lasts all the year long. The hierarchy too has begun to look more kindly on what we are doing in spite of earlier frowns at the sheer vitality and originality of our liturgies, and a fear that somehow this was all happening outside the Christian community as a whole. A fair number of things which are not quite right still remain, but all the same we feel we can describe in positive terms what we have achieved up till now.

Our Easter with young people.

The Easter I am going to describe takes place in San Asensio (La Rioja), in my District of Bilbao. The fact that the District novitiate is here with all its facilities enables us to cope with quite large numbers of young people. As the District Retreat takes place at the same time, the place is almost empty apart from one or two to keep the place running, and so the young people feel they have the place to themselves and so are less inhibited. In fact without the availability of San Asensio and the willing cooperation of the Brothers there our task would be very more difficult.

At Easter 1987, there were 150 young people aged from 17 to 21. The organising team consisted of one priest, thirteen Brothers, a nun and a lay supervisor. The young people came from all our different schools in the District, and also a fair number had already left school but kept in touch through the groups or Christian communities to which they belonged. There are, of course, other places in the District where various groups come together to celebrate Easter, and these are mostly younger pupils. There are also parish-based celebrations which are not restricted exclusively to the pupils of the Brothers.

The preparation.

Easter needs preparation. Three months beforehand, the District Pastoral Team chooses a theme for Easter (the year we are talking about it was "The Celebration of Life"), and sends the various groups three catechetical work-schemes to help them prepare themselves. Two meetings are taken up with planning the daily timetables, sharing out the work of preparation and coping with practical problems etc. In both the preparations and in the actual celebration the young people have a major part to play with the help and guidance of the Brothers. Two days before Easter, five young people and two Brothers go to San Asensio to settle the final details.

The Easter celebration.

In 1987, things began on Maundy Thursday morning. The young people were met on arrival, made to feel welcome and shown to their dormitories or rooms. Everyone was given a name tag to wear, which by a clever combination of colours, letters and numbers, would later enable the organisers to form groups and get activities going. There followed the usual round of greetings, the meeting of old friends, the making of new ones. After the meal and a period of recreation, everyone settled down to small group meetings at which the first serious contacts were made and the mood was set for the following three days. There was a choir practice before the Supper of the Lord which lasted two peaceful hours and during which we felt really welcome there, just as we were, with our own lives, in the same way as the Disciples had been invited to the Paschal Meal, invited also to do as Jesus had done, to wash the feet of so many people around us who had need of it. And then, in the silence and peace of a beautiful night, we gathered together beneath the trees for our "prayer in the Garden". It was a time, in the company of Jesus, to make decisions, an invitation for each one of us to make choices about our own lives. After praying together, we broke up to pray either by ourselves or in small groups.

The following morning, our morning prayer drew us deep into the spirit of Good Friday. The re-enactment of Jesus' trial, the preparations for the Way of the Cross, a series of activities aimed at making each one of us think of death in our own lives, all this helped us to prepare for the celebration of the Death of the Lord with its climax, the adoration of the cross, which all took part in in an atmosphere of great peace and to the accompaniment of the hymn: "You will adore no one but Him". The night temperature was pleasant enough for us to be able to make the Stations of the Cross outside along the paths of the property. Each group took turns to carry the large cross, stopping at each station: the Lord walking to his death in the persons of these young people. When the Stations were over, those who wished were able to continue their prayers at the foot of the cross.

Saturday morning was divided into two parts. The first part was taken up with a group activity based on a "pack of cards", and the young people were asked to think about what were the things that kept their life going. In the second part, there was a penitential service. In the first part of this service there was an opportunity for the group to speak about the reasons each had for asking the Father's pardon; and then those who wished could go and speak to the priest individually. During the afternoon not a sound was heard anywhere: the group was invited to experience a few hours of the "desert experience"; to become recollected; to create an interior feeling of silence, ready to welcome the Great News later that evening. For those who found this too difficult, some rooms had been set aside where they could listen to suitable religious music, read, watch

audiovisual programmes etc. Then, at night, there took place the most important celebration: "Jesus is risen!" To begin with, there was a proclamation similar to what we can find in our towns and villages, then the ceremony of the fire. After the procession and entry into the Church, the atmosphere remained recollected and the lights remained dimmed. Then there followed the readings retracing the story of Salvation, and at last came the joyful moment when the priest, having finished the Gospel, announced to us: "He is risen!" At that point the church was flooded with light, alleluias rang out in triumph, and from all corners of the church there floated up balloons of all colours, propelled in all directions by the hands of the youthful congregation. After the ceremony of the water and the renewal of the promises of baptism, the liturgy took on quite a different atmosphere. When we finally left the church it was already dawn and Easter Sunday morning, the bells of San Asensio rang out, and rockets streaked across the sky. Each one wished everyone else a happy Easter and celebrations went on till it was time to go. At six o'clock in the morning, coaches loaded up and everyone went home, enriched by this joyful religious experience.

Celebrating Easter in such an atmosphere is not the answer to everything and, if it is an isolated event, can smack of a pop festival; but for young people who week after week come together in their groups and Christian communities to deepen their faith it is an enriching experience and we can bear witness to that.

Brother Javier Lorenzo.