

A LIFE... A COMMITMENT

Brother Etienne Lacatte

In Lourdes, in August 1951, there was a lot of walking to do! It seemed a good idea to use a walking stick. Is that when my illness declared itself? Br. Richard Heim remembers how difficult it was for me to get up on the stand to read in the refectory at Vouziers. That was in 1944. I used this stick for the 10 years I was in Annappes, walking several times a week the kilometre or so to the station or bus stop on the road to Tournai.

In September 1963, as there were no more academic students in the 5th year, I was sent to the Pensionnat St. Joseph at Chateau Thierry. I taught mathematics and physics in the middle school and catechism in the second form. By this time I was using two elbow crutches.

During the summer holidays of 1966, I spent 6 weeks in the Raymond Poincare hospital at Garches for a checkup and assessment of my state of health. My illness was diagnosed to be spastic paraplegia, which is close to multiple sclerosis. You don't die of it, but you live a long time with it. I saw a lot of people in wheelchairs and soon I would have my own.

A prefabricated building was put up in which I had my room, bathroom, etc. and easy access. In the same building there were 3 classrooms, one of which was a laboratory. I taught there with the help of a back projector. Things got difficult, and in 1971 I began looking for a place where I could be of some use. I visited various centres and hostels catering for handicapped people. I eventually went to Notre Dame de L'Etoile at the Abbaye de Montebourg. Here, Br. Yves Le Roux found me some light work in the agricultural school.

On June 17th 1973, a big meeting was to take place at the Abbey: the occasion was the Day for Sick and Handicapped People of the Montebourg area. Mrs Rigault, who works in the hardware shop, suggested to me, before I could get a word in, to sign on for June 17th. I hesitated: after all, I was a teacher first, and my illness came second. Anyway, I finally agreed to take

part in the meeting. Had I not done so, I would have hidden somewhere so as not to see what was going on. That was the day of my conversion. I was in a wheelchair and I had a lot of friends in the Montebourg centre, but I didn't consider myself to be "one of them"! And then I met the Christian Fraternity of Sick and Handicapped People (FCPMH) and the Association of Paralysed People of France. It was at this point that I accepted I belonged to this great family and discovered there were many ways sick and handicapped people could render service.

Once I had chosen to become involved in this way at Montebourg, I was surprised to discover how, each day and in various circumstances, my list of sick people to visit grew longer and longer. A local Fraternity team asked me to join them, and soon I was helping to run it. The next step was weekend recollections with prayer and relaxation at a diocesan centre in Coutances. The Foyer Notre Dame d'Esperance at Briqueville-sur-mer had very good holiday facilities.

September 1978: the Rheims newsletter announced that a community was going to be set up in Loivre in spring. It called for volunteers, for retired Brothers. It was a chance for me to return to Champagne and I volunteered. I spent 8 very good years there. Shortly after I arrived, I was appointed diocesan coordinator for the FCPMH. With the help of three healthy and committed young persons we were able to cater for a large group of (C.A.T.), young mentally handicapped people. One of these asked the following question: "What will happen to me when my parents are no longer there?" Many of those who seek some kind of independence had the same query.

LA SEVE ET LE RAMEAU (The sap and the branch)

An Association, a residential centre.

Anne's words: "What will happen to me?" needed an answer. Francois, Remi and Francoise who helped to run the youth group had already worked out a plan. At our first meeting as a team of 5 at Loivre on December 12th 1982, the principles according to which we would operate were laid down. These same principles were incorporated in the house "charter" 6 years later: * have a family atmosphere and freedom of conscience for everyone; * promote the acquisition of independence; * provide a place for discussion and reflection; * provide a place where mutual help is given;

The spirit of the centre:

- * everyone is treated as an individual;
- * everyone is responsible;

- * everyone must live his life fully;
- * there should be mutual acceptance, going forward together, building;
- * everyone should find an ideal and seek to fulfil it;
- * everyone should have an aim in life.

And so the "Seve et Rameau" association was born, and had its board of directors and its office. Before long, hundreds of people joined us. A great deal of hard work awaited us at that point, and many pitfalls. We needed the support of politicians; there was work on commissions dealing with building plans, finance, medical considerations, marches. An experienced architect and a plan to build a centre in Rheims became involved in our projects. We had to prepare a dossier with a view to obtaining approval from the Social and Medico- social services and the General Council. This included building plans, a budget for funding, staff, intake, daily costs, etc.

The first brick was laid on September 12th 1987, in the presence of the sub-prefect Mr. Cheriet, the archbishop Mgr Menager, Mr. Vecten President of the General Council, Mr. Falala the deputy mayor, Mr. Hanrot President of the Rheims social centre, Mr. Lena the architect...and some 300 other people.

The centre was opened on December 1st 1988. In the course of the following 6 weeks it filled up with residents. As a founding member and secretary for the Association administrative board, I took my place there as one of the 22 residents. On December 15th, I wrote to the Visitor: "Everyone here, the director, the staff and the residents, says I should remain here. I have a mission to fulfil here, maintaining the spirit along the lines set down by the founder-members who all came from the FCPMH. I feel that my place is here rather than in the retirement home in Borny".

Back in Metz in January 1989, I reread the Rule and my attention was drawn to article 16c and especially 16d: "Advancing age or infirmity...Motivated by faith and zeal, they search for new ways to exercise their ministry as a response to a new call from God". It is with this in mind that I wrote once again to my superior: "...it is because I wish to be faithful to my call to

the vocation of a Brother of the Christian Schools, as well to respond to a pressing invitation of the Holy Spirit, that I have made my request to undertake this particular service. As my "life's journey" has shown in the course of this article, I could have said: I've been looking after sick and handicapped people for 16 years now, and the completion of the Centre is the culmination of all that. It is a very successful undertaking, and our director has brought together a staff of very high calibre. He is himself an active member of staff. At the centre we offer 2 year training courses for medico-psychiatric nurses.

I sent the results of my wise discernment to the superior, and received in return a formal letter sending me on my mission. On March 31st, I returned as a permanent resident. My letter went on as follows: "My contribution is not calculated in terms of profitability, but it will help people to live together happily. I cannot think of a better word to describe our life at the Centre than "conviviality". What is even more remarkable and enriching is the fact that our Director and two persons are Muslims. The part of the town where we are, the Wilson district, has a high percentage of immigrants.

My life still has its problems. The way I think, however, is that situations involving conflicts can be solved, sometimes with the help of a third person. And if on occasions I've felt like going back to Borny, I had friends to restore my flagging spirits. "You can't manage by yourself" was a slogan for one FCPMH annual campaign. My presence here creates links with the Church, the Christian Fraternity for Sick and Handicapped People and the local people. I like my wheelchair and the chance it gives me to meet people on the street, especially when I need a helping hand.

**And so, I think I have lived
"where God put me".**

(Quotation from a picture
of Br. Nicet Joseph, Superior General).