

THE BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS IN THE CAMEROON CHURCH

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The first five Brothers of the Christian Schools arrived in Mbanga in October 1948. They came from Canada at the request of the late Mgr. Paul Bouque to take charge of the primary school and teacher training. They worked for several years in Mbanga where their presence and doubtlessly their expertise attracted the attention of several bishops who asked them either to take charge of primary schools and already functioning secondary schools, or to start up new secondary schools. And so it was they took over the Vogt College in 1951, De La Salle College in Douala in 1951, primary schools in Eseka and Bandjoun in 1955, and St. Paul's College in Bafang in 1956.

Later, in 1958, other Brothers of the Christian Schools came from Holland at the request of Mgr. Teerenstra, Bishop of Doume. They opened De La Salle College at Doume, St. Joseph's Technical College in Diang and Bary College in Batouri.

The greatest expansion of the work of the Brothers in all areas occurred during the first years after independence. We give a list of the establishments they founded:

Primary schools

Mbanga, Nkongsamba, Bafang, Bandjoun, Eseka, St. Joseph of Mvolye, Efo.

Secondary schools for general education

St. John's in Mbanga, John XXIII's in Efo, Bary in Batouri, La Salle in Doume, St. Paul's in Bafang, Vogt in Yaounde. The last three establishments offered a complete course of secondary studies.

Technical schools

De La Salle in Douala, St. Joseph's in Diang, St. John's in Mbanga, which began courses in commerce in 1959.

Finally, there is the Reception Centre for young people in difficulty which was located at first in the grounds of De La Salle College in Douala and then on a neighbouring site. Eventually, the Centre moved to its present site in Bepanda. This establishment was taken over by the Ministry of Social Affairs in September 1972.

Since 1975, Brothers from France have involved themselves in other forms of activity, especially in the villages. They help village people to improve their living conditions in such areas as health, education, housing and agriculture. In the new villages of the Mbam district, they try to get the local population to organise themselves into communities, each with its social and Christian structures, and to provide themselves gradually with essential facilities.

Finally we should mention the Polish Brothers who began arriving in 1981. They come to fill some of the gaps caused by the ageing of personnel and to provide the new energy needed to take up the challenge offered by Christian education in a society where young people are subjected to numerous influences which are often opposed to Christian ideals.

As soon as the Brothers arrived in Cameroon they began to set up structures and to organise themselves. In 1955, our religious province was canonically constituted and was called the District of Douala. In 1955, a juniorate was opened in Yaounde. In 1957, the novitiate was opened in Efo. More than 60 young men from Cameroon, Togo and Benin have passed through its doors. In 1959, the scholasticate was opened. Unfortunately, as we look back on all our past efforts the results we see are disappointing, for we have few young Brothers. These, in spite of a less than encouraging past, believe that the Church in Cameroon needs Brothers to give young people a quality education inspired by Gospel values, and have decided to consecrate their lives to this noble task.

What we have said so far highlights the great variety of the educational work undertaken by the Brothers. We have spoken of primary schools, secondary schools and centres providing other forms of help. The Brothers have left their mark more in some areas of education than in others. One of the most important of these, which one tends to forget, is that of primary education. When the Brothers ran mission schools, as they were then called, not only did they have a central school but also a number of outlying schools which were dependent on it. Sometimes the number of pupils taught in this way was more than four thousand. In addition to ensuring good discipline and organisation in the schools, the Brothers tried at the same time to create a Christian atmosphere and a spirit of hard

work, encouraging the efforts of the children by healthy competition and rewards suited to their age and in line with the thinking of those days. They saw it as their duty to provide follow-up for their teachers and to help them complete their training. Some of these still occupy posts of responsibility in Catholic education today.

This work of training teachers was complemented by that of the Brother school inspectors who spent their time travelling the length and breadth of the huge dioceses of those days. As they came to each school, they organised pedagogical meetings. During the school holidays, they organised training sessions. One of their great achievements was to establish in all the schools of the diocese an identical course of studies in each subject. This enabled them to give the same monthly exam in all the schools. The Brothers always tried to provide teachers with suitable teaching materials. Among others, we can mention Brother Hilaire's playing cards, Brother Yves' Art of Observation, Brother Odilon's book on technology, and Brother Rock's catechetical documents.

Since handing over responsibility for the primary schools to their lay colleagues, the Brothers have concentrated their efforts on secondary teaching. They try to provide a quality Christian education which takes in all aspects of the development of the person of the pupil. Special attention is paid to their artistic talents. Certain schools have formed brass bands or orchestras composed of musicians who have had a good musical training.

From the very beginning, the Brothers have laid great stress on technical education so as to provide industry, commerce and banks with the qualified personnel they need. Much care has been taken to provide students with the equipment necessary to ensure high quality technical training. A visit to the workshops of the schools in Diang, Douala, to those of De La Salle, as well as to the typing facilities in St. John's School in Mbanga would show how true this is.

We have already mentioned the work that has been done among the rural population. In September 1990, out of the 45 active Brothers, 12 were working full-time or part-time as organisers or social aid helpers. They are involved in a variety of activities such as

agriculture, animal husbandry, housing, hygiene, water purification, basic health care and the training of village community leaders. In the eastern province, one Brother is involved full-time in the education of pygmies. In a dozen villages he has set up centres offering pre-school education and has put an assistant in charge of them. To teach these children he uses the ORA method (Observe, Reflect, Act) which is reminiscent of the Catholic Action approach of "See, Judge, Act". Well-illustrated textbooks based on this method enable children to learn reading, counting and to increase their vocabulary on the basis of what they see around them.

Another scheme also deserves mention here. It began in October 1990. It consists in introducing agricultural education into the primary schools of the Diocese of Yagoua, or more precisely, at Lara and Mindjill in the Kaele department. The task of the two Brothers involved is to implement, in the special conditions of the far north province, a programme drawn up by the Ministry of National Education.

Finally, a group of Brothers belonging to our province of Cameroon has started up a vocational training centre for young workers at N'Djamena. They follow an accelerated course lasting one year or two in car mechanics, electricity or refrigeration. In September 1991, courses began in plumbing and metalwork.

In the course of the first hundred years of the Church's existence in Cameroon, Catholic education has proved to be one of the most effective means of training and educating young people. It seeks to maintain a high standard of excellence. By their disinterested dedication, its members continue to bear witness to the values in which they believe. The role played by innumerable former pupils at all levels of society illustrates the irreplaceable contribution of Catholic education to the development of the country. Religious congregations of men and women, priests and lay people, are responsible for this remarkable success. The Brothers of the Christian Schools are happy to have played their part in this immense undertaking. They are fully committed to continuing their activities in the field of the education of young people, and thus pursuing a mission their vocation has led them to choose.