

SCHOOL AND LIFE Former students speak about their schooldays Beirut, Lebanon

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"According to God's plan, each one of us has a life that is in a constant state of becoming from the first moment of our existence till our last breath... The school is a living educator of that life" (Pope John Paul II).

The Brothers' school in Beirut, the Collège du Sacré Coeur, is celebrating the centenary of its foundation this year. "A glorious past, a bright present and a clearly marked out future: the seed has borne fruit after years of struggle" (La Mutuelle, p.28).

To mark the occasion, a group of former students, who were school leavers in the 1940-1950 period, organised a short questionnaire centred on their memories of school.

"50 years later! Which aspects of school life had the most profound effect on your life? Tell us what the Brothers' school, the Collège du Sacré Coeur, meant for you at that time. What are your memories of this school?"

1. Answers received and psycho-pedagogical comments

The answers, apart from some differences in detail, express a general consensus regarding the **vital role** played by Catholic schools in Lebanon. They recognised, either explicitly or implicitly, that they corresponded to a typically Christian ideal, which implies fidelity to revealed truth, fidelity to a Christian vision of man, as an individual or as part of a group, and fidelity to the teaching of the Church.

The first idea that emerges from these answers concerns time, the puzzle of **time**. Events that took place in school 50 years ago seem as if they happened yesterday. The experiences of school life had a profound influence on the development of young personalities.

Why is this so? Most answers say it was, first of all, the good atmosphere created and maintained in the school leavers' classes. The friendly atmosphere gave a new impetus and meaning to everyone's personal life. The faith gave this school setting a special dimension and significance. One former student, and now a magistrate, writes as follows:

"The search for spiritual values was for us the interior response of our immovable faith, hope and charity".

Another cause was the **teachers' approach**. They achieved more by their presence than by their knowledge and methods. As someone else wrote: "The teachers' approach was not to impose, but to lead on and accompany". What they wanted most of all was to help the pupils with their specific needs and differences.

"The teacher is first a friend and then a judge".

A third set of answers dealt with **educational means** which could make the educational process more effective in providing young people with a balanced formation.

There were many suggestions. The most frequent ones referred to the use of active or "participatory" methods. Participation is the art of making people share friendship, charity and responsibility. As one former student wrote: "In those days, it meant allowing pupils to find their place and role in the school community".

Another former student gives a good summary of these two aspects of participation: "For me it meant dialogue in an atmosphere of human sympathy and respect for opinions. In this atmosphere each one became conscious of his right to become informed and to inform, and in this way to work out with the others what the thinking of the group was about this or that problem".

In those days, such an approach was quite bold, but the results were very positive, as many former students attested. There were two main lines of thought in what they wrote, neither of which was exclusive, but rather complementary.

The first maintained that it was essential to obtain external help for Catholic schools, in particular, from the State. The other stated that what was most important was the renewal of the spirit and methodology in teaching in the schools.

The first approach would serve to improve the legal and financial situation of schools, influence public opinion more, and benefit from a stronger position adopted by the hierarchy. The other is more interested in improving relations in schools, building up a real educational community, establishing participational teaching methods and a new style of religious teaching.

Both approaches, however, fall within a framework of pluralism and regionalism. They both agree that, by renewing itself in this way, Catholic education would be in the very heart of current schemes to reform education and would make an appreciable contribution to them as well to the solution of the great problems of our times.

2. To promote a school committed to being Christian

It is in this complex psycho-sociological context that our questionnaire takes on special importance. The first to suffer, in particular during the first few years of the war, was the family, faced with uncertainty, break-up, and disappearance. All this spread to schools, teaching staff, various social bodies and the structures and institutions of the state.

"Catholic education, such as it is in present-day Lebanon, must evolve, reform and renew itself. This can happen only if certain conditions are met". Those who answered the questionnaire were unanimous in agreeing with this assessment, saying: "adapt, yes, but at the same time preserve the specific characteristics of the Catholic school".

"For us, this consists basically in refusing to dissociate man from the believer in the person of the child and of the teacher in the educational community".

"Our school is committed to education and not only to instruction. That is why, at least on one level, parents and pupils want it to have free structures and teaching methods. Parents have placed their children in a Christian school, and they want it to be entirely so".

A school committed to being Christian has to function on a higher level - that of faith. It functions in terms of Gospel values which it seeks to learn and practise.

Rather than draw attention to problems that would lead to arguments, most of those who answered our questions stated their conviction of the need for committed Christian schools.

These are described in such ways as: "the aim of a committed school...is to form Christians for tomorrow's society"; "The school, the educational community, according to the Gospel, should make it possible for each pupil to meet the Lord personally, and then commit himself to the Lord he has been enabled to meet".

"The Catholic school has an important role to play in the salvific mission of the Church. It establishes Catholic schools to fulfil this specific mission. The Church considers Catholic schools to be especially able to offer an integrated education, because they are places where a particular view of the world, man and history is developed and communicated" (Vatican II, GE).

The Church is fully aware that, by offering its educational programme to the people of our times, it is performing an indispensable and urgent task. In fact, "by means of Catholic schools, it contributes the promotion of true progress and integrated education to the process of secular learning".

As can be seen, the **service of others** is considered important in all these answers: "help all those that work there to become free and responsible".

"God wishes all people to be saved" (J.B. de La Salle).

Schools run by the Brothers of the Christian Schools seek to provide this service to people, according to the Gospel and to their own specific spirit.

The Conduct of Christian Schools, a document that goes back to the foundation of the Congregation, describes an original teaching approach - a "Lasallian" approach - which remains effective to this day. This Conduct, published in 1706, was written in the form of rules only after numerous meetings with the most senior Brothers of the Institute, who were also the most proficient teachers in school, and after many years of experience.

The Founder of the Brothers often draws the attention of the teacher to the need of having an interior spiritual attitude, which he calls **zeal**, to inspire his work in the school.

Zeal consists in being aware of responsibility before God with regard to pupils. It ensures that the teacher has the possibility of collaborating with the work of God by contributing to the salvation of these pupils. Zeal is a fundamental belief that, in spite of appearances, pupils can achieve the growth made possible by their vocation as human beings and their dignity as sons of God.

Zeal, understood in this way, gives life dynamic force, by providing unity, fullness and meaning. It could be said that one of St La Salle's definition of a Christian teacher is "a man of God for others".

He has communicated his message to his followers all over the world. In our own days, the Brothers and their colleagues follow in his footsteps by sharing this new and creative love for poor children, who have neither hope nor love.

3. Personal tributes of two former students

Michel Daher, the present Minister of State Education, writes as follows:

"Memories of those times have basically to do with unremitting work at serious studies.

"The school system of those days was quite hard and strict order was imposed. The academic standard of both arts and science courses was excellent. I remember that all the pupils in our school passed the baccalaureat. This was due to a very high degree to the system and teaching methods of the Brothers.

"This education certainly helped me to become what I am today. Afterwards I went to study law at a university run by the Jesuits, but it was different. I owe my basic education to the Brothers of the Christian Schools. It is the result of great energy and methodical and constant work".

The other former student is a Moslem, Sheik Raffoul Fakhry. He was a pupil at the Collège du Sacré Coeur for 10 years (1938-48) in the primary and secondary sections. He wrote the following:

"I have excellent memories of the years I spent at the Collège du Sacré Coeur, and I remember especially the excellent teaching we received from our teachers. This contributed not only to the acquisition of our literary and scientific knowledge, but it also formed our personalities, developed our intelligence and our ways of thinking.

"The spirit of charity and mutual help which we were taught has been carried over quite naturally, in one way or another, to our professional and social activities. The foundation of the Mutuelle for Former Students and Brothers' Schools of Lebanon is due to a large extent to the education we received from our teachers.

"The Brothers are brothers to everyone. Brotherhood is their emblem" (*La Mutuelle*, p.29).