



02-E-05

RUN SCHOOLS OR FACE A CATASTROPHE

Understanding the situation

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Both catholic and protestant schools have been in the Camerouns for almost a century. From the very beginning of evangelization the missions opened schools followed by colleges.

The colonial administrators made the opening of a school a condition for opening a new mission. Though sent by a secular government in Paris to run the "Colony" for France, the High Commissioners of the Metropolis none-the-less made grants to denominational schools.

Each superior of a mission was at the same time director of his primary school and sometimes of the college. The Church regarded the school as the first place in which to preach the Gospel.

In 1948, a bishop asked the Brothers to run a Training College for Teachers. Other bishops followed his example and soon there was a considerable number of religious in the primary and secondary schools of the country. This was a period of glory for the denominational schools.

The situation changed in the 1970s. Religious personnel became scarce and the influx of students continued to grow in both primary and secondary schools. In the primary schools, lay people became directors and in the secondary schools Cameroun lay teachers form an increasing percentage of the teaching staff. The F.S.C. are the first to hand over the management of their schools to the Camerounais.

But in many cases the two phenomena, Camerounization and plethora of staff, are not organized but suffered as a necessary evil.

1) Many parish priests, where laymen have taken over, are no longer interested in the school where they no longer have any authority, Discipline, levels of study and results are in rapid decline.

2) Diocesan directors, often unprepared, neglect pedagogical leadership in favour of the administration of finances and of personnel.

3) The primary school teachers getting less and less help are now more and more overworked. In most schools the teacher pupil ratio is 1:60. The six year olds start their schooling in classes of up to 100.

4) The salaries of teachers in private schools remain static while the cost of living is constantly on the increase. Hence the loss of the best of the teachers to more lucrative posts. In spite of the efforts of the Church to obtain just salaries for the teachers all attempts at improvement have been blocked. It is the State which fixes the fees in the private schools and also the amount of grant. Moreover, the Teachers' Union is ineffective since it is affiliated to the one and only party.

5) The present schools in the Camerouns seem to be less and less adapted to the cultural context of the rediscovery of the ancient values proper to the country, of an expanding economy and of youth unemployment.

SOME ATTEMPTS AT FINDING A SOLUTION IN THE DIOCESE OF YAOUNDE

In spite of the attempts by the Cameroun Episcopal Conference, the problems of salaries have never been solved. Hope springs anew with the new political regime under President Biya. The elementary principle of social justice, "equal pay for equal work" seems like a dream after 25 years of vexations. The effort to find sponsors for our schools has never given satisfactory results.

Since 1971, the Church has attempted to let parents and local people generally have their say, to let them take the initiative in educational and teaching matters. They were deprived of this right with the advent of the white schools. This is the School for Collective Advancement which the Brothers initiated at the request of Archbishop Jesus Zoa of Yaoundé.

Since 1973, the local Church, aided by International Organizations (Swiss Lent Action, CCFD) organized short courses of a month for its 1050 primary school teachers to improve teaching techniques and initiate them into leadership methods for their milieu.

At the same time, the Church also organized training courses in leadership for the local communities, courses not only for teachers but also for the responsible people in the neighbourhood, such as religious and political leaders, traders, influential planters, and agricultural and hygiene leaders, etc. To adapt evangelization better to the local mentality, catechists have perfected a method and catechetical text books in the traditional language and according to the needs of horizontal sharing (palabre) and a more meditative form of prayer.

To motivate the leaders in their function as Christian educators, days of recollection have been organized for the last few years, the themes being taken from the teaching of St. John Baptist de La Salle for the Brothers. In 1982, the theme was, "Make no distinction between what concerns your employment and what concerns your sanctification". In 1983, "You are the ministers of God and the ambassadors of Jesus of Jesus Christ to the children confided to your care". As a result of these recollections, many of the teachers have expressed the wish to know the Founder of the Brothers better and to celebrate his feastday every year.

BUT IS THIS SUFFICIENT?

After decades of ineffectual effort to obtain a just remuneration for the teachers, is not running schools, in fact, conniving at a grave social injustice?

On the other hand, does not the handing of a school over to the State authorities risk depriving the little ones and those in remote parts, who have no voice, of their right to instruction? Have we made ourselves sufficiently clear about the teaching content and methods better adapted to the needs of the people?

Have we used efficacious means to make parents with no voice against authority more aware of their rights? What can still be done so that they do not rely on the Church in the struggle we share with them?

We have invested in courses and educational days for their training. What other means can we take for their continuing training?

The spiritual doctrine of De La Salle, their patron, inspires and stimulates our teachers. What can we do to share it with them and bring it within their reach?

There are still 50 F.S.C. in school in the Camerouns working side by side with many former pupils. How can they become better promoters of pedagogical, cultural and evangelical renewal?

The Brothers have been working in the Camerouns for 35 years. What do they know about their former students? Why do not the Associations of Former Students share in the preoccupations the Church has with the catholic school?

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