



03-B-16

YOUTH VILLA: PASTORAL CENTRE

Youth Villa had its origin in the desire of the Brothers of the District of Québec to make a direct contribution to education in the faith especially of young people but also of numbers of adults. It is, in a way, an answer to a simple question: "We can no longer teach school, what are we to do?"

We must point out that in Québec, as in the rest of Canada, control of schools has been out of the hands of religious congregations for the past twenty-five years. The state has established a system of education which is modern, free and open to the whole population from nursery school to university.

Though the public education system is officially Catholic (A bill to be introduced in parliament proposes important changes in this matter) and religion is taught in all state schools, except where the parents demand exemption for their children, the pupils do not always receive a Catholic formation of high quality. This is particularly the case at secondary level, between the ages of 12 and 17, where the students have little opportunity to question and clarify their beliefs and no place for meaningful religious celebration or exchange of opinions, with the help of competent adults, on the problems posed by modern society.

The "Youth Villa" is intended to be just such a place. It is not a perfect answer to the problem but it has been in existence for the past 13 years and is known, appreciated and encouraged by the bishops of our local church. This comprises the residents of the city of Québec and its surroundings, approximately 750,000 people. Though about 12,000 young people and adults come to the Villa every year there are many who have still to get to know it.

It has been in operation since 1971. It replaced an animation centre which the Brothers had established some years before on the grounds and in the building of the former juniorate of Ste. Foy. You could almost say that, without the name, the pastoral centre already existed there, because when the house at Ste. Foy was sold, its pastoral activities continued at the Villa from October, 1971.

The present building had been acquired three years before as a new juniorate but it soon became evident that the juniorate system no longer fulfilled its purpose. It was no better than a good boarding school. It was finally closed in 1971. The pastoral centre occupies the building and gives a new "vocation" to the house.

The Villa, had, therefore, never been a Brothers' school nor a retreat house attached to a school. Besides, the Brothers of the District of Québec have had no schools for the past twenty years. Nor is the Villa a house of formation. Briefly it is this: a place where young people (and sometimes adults) from schools and organizations in the region can come for days, evenings or week-ends of reflection. As Brother Bruno Blondeau, its principal founder, wrote, "The pastoral centre is a service offered by the Church to families and schools through the Brothers of the Christian Schools". That objective has not changed though the manner of providing the service may change according to circumstances.

As I mentioned before, the students of all schools (private or public) have religious instruction periods provided for in the school timetable and the services of a pastoral animator (school chaplain). If a teacher decides to ask permission from the school authorities to take a group of pupils to the Villa it is because he personally believes that what they will do there will help them to deepen their faith, to express it or in some cases to rediscover it. All the groups that come during the week are brought by teachers (mostly lay people) who have confidence in us. Without them we would have no direct contact with the school population.

Since 1978 a completely new team animates the centre. For this purpose a Brother was withdrawn from a state school and two lay people employed as animators, partly because there were no Brothers available and partly because we wanted to form a mixed team with different life experiences. If we decided to put so much effort into forming a team of animators it was because a study done by some Brothers connected with the centre had shown that it was necessary if the work was to continue. The Brothers as a whole agreed and it was with their moral support that the new team set to work in September, 1978. The team included a Brother interested in faith education of adults and a Capuchin Father who acted as chaplain to the Community. Since then the team has been expanded to include three Brothers together with, for this year at least, two clerical students who are completing their theological studies at Laval University.

The Brothers' Community at the Villa occupies a considerable part of the building and is composed of a number of Brothers, some of whom are retired. These Brothers, working full-time or part-time provide important support for the animators by looking after the meals, doing repairs, improving the building and grounds, doing the secretarial work and keeping the accounts.

The pastoral centre comprises two sections: an animation team, composed of Brothers, lay people, and a priest and a community of Brothers who look after the material needs of the centre.

Quite recently, December, 1983, the centre published a brochure for the benefit of those who might wish to avail of its services. (These, we must add, are not completely free) The contributions of groups cover about 20% of running costs. The rest is made up by the District.

I shall give below the complete text of the brochure as it describes accurately the present position:

OBJECTIVES. Through its work the centre wishes to contribute to the pastoral work of the Church particularly in the field of the education of the young in the faith.

It provides help for pastoral animators, parents and catechists who ask for its services. It is also open to groups of adults in search of the faith.

ACTIVITIES

- Days of recollection every week for secondary school students.
- Days of intensive preparation for Confirmation.
- Evenings and week-ends for Scripture study groups.
- Meetings of adult groups for study of the faith.
- 24 hours of recollection and silence.
- Animation in schools and parishes.
- Meetings of groups and movements connected with the pastoral ministry.

The animation of the days of recollection is generally done by the centre's animation team which prepares programmes adapted to particular groups.

METHODS. Basing our concept on the fact that young people have the faith and that they want to deepen it and make it grow we offer them themes for reflection and activities suitable to their age. In this way we invite them to receive Jesus Christ as the Good News for people of today.

Means: activities and reflection, workshops and sharing sessions; Celebration of the Word, of Reconciliation and of the Eucharist; Moments of relaxation.

THE ANIMATION TEAM. The work of animation is carried out by a qualified team composed of religious, lay people and a priest. All have been approved by the bishop of the diocese. Several religious provide essential services.

A COMMUNITY. The Brothers of the Christian Schools direct and maintain the institution. It is for them a way of carrying out the work of faith education among the young begun by their founder, St. John Baptist de La Salle.

ENVIRONMENT. Situated on the banks of the Saint Lawrence, half way between Cap-Rouge and Saint Augustin, the Villa provides an ideal environment of beauty and tranquillity conducive to the recollection required for any serious reflection. The site is enchanting at all seasons of the year.

INSPIRING DECOR. The principal meeting place is without doubt the "Jardin". It is, par excellence, a place for interior recollection. It calls for silence. It creates silence. It is decorated with real trees, dried, with their leaves, as well as with some remarkable pieces of sculpture in wood which are thrown into relief by concealed lighting. Off this hall are rooms for small groups, arranged in varied and original ways. One of these rooms, "La Source", is reserved for private prayer. (End of quotation from brochure)

I stressed above that the teachers and school pastoral animators are our only contacts with the school-going population. It is thanks to them that groups of students, both boys and girls, particularly from secondary schools, can come to the centre. That remains true.

As from this year an important group of children will leave the school environment for religious instruction. They are the pupils of the sixth class i.e. children of 11 to 12 years old who are finishing primary school and who are preparing to receive the sacrament of Confirmation. Up to now this preparation was done during school hours.

The parish, through the local committee for preparation for Confirmation, will bring these children to us for days of instruction and reflection on the meaning of Baptism and of the new sacrament they are going to receive. This preparation will occupy the animation team during February, March and part of April. If we devote so much time to it, it is because the demand is so great. Not less than seventy groups of children (40 to 55 at a time) will follow one another at the centre for days or evenings of reflection and instruction. Some parishes ask the school authorities for days off school so that the children can come to the centre from 9.00 a.m. to 3.00 p.m. Others, who cannot come during the day, arrange to come between 3.00 p.m. and 9.00 p.m. and often later because the centre is occupied.

Others again come in the evening or on Saturdays because they do not want their children's initiation into sacramental life associated with school. (Everything leads us to believe that this movement will become more popular in the near future.) Who brings these children? It is the parents through a committee established by the parish. The parents must, in effect, take precise and positive action to have their children prepared for the sacraments. They must make application to the parish, bring the child with them when making the application and guarantee a follow-up.

In this way the parents will play a more active role in the preparation of their children for Confirmation. The Villa had already taken the initiative in this matter by insisting that a minimum number of parents accompany the children, at least one parent to eight children. This was, indeed, a happy initiative: it gave parents an opportunity of seeing the kind of catechetical instruction the child received and a chance to experience a day of recollection. ("It was for us a real retreat" they often tell us) And lastly it made us known and appreciated as catechists. (We can barely meet the demand. And that without any advertising.)

This period of intense work with children finishing primary school is all that we can do for them. Our principal work is with young people between the ages of 12 and 17 who, according to what we were recently told by a specialist, are in a "pastoral desert", by which he meant that little was being done for them on the pastoral plane.

Of course the pastoral centre is much more than what I have described above. Let me say in conclusion that its programme is open, flexible and continually adapting itself to the pastoral needs of the young so as to be able to answer to their real needs which cannot be other than spiritual.

Our fidelity to St. John Baptist de La Salle is shown by the interest we take in and the priority we give to the faith education of the young. We carry out our work in a spirit of faith for none of us can cause faith to spring up in the heart of others nor can we measure the fruits of our activities. We work in a spirit of humility because our programmes and methods of today may not be suitable in three to five years' time and knowing, at the same time, that there may be better or more urgent work to be done. Lastly, all our activity is inspired by charity. We try to live charity. It is what we propose to those who are "humble of heart".

Bro. Florent GAUDREULT
Centre de Pastorale des FEC
4860, St. Félix - St. Augustin-de-Québec
GOA 3E0, CANADA