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THE BROTHERS IN TURKEY

Since the Brothers first went to Turkey in 1841 to teach the children of poor Christians, their situation as well as that of the Christians living there has changed utterly. The Ottoman Empire, "the sick man of Europe" was replaced after the first World War by a Republic, ultra nationalist and lay. The Brothers' Institute, which at the turn of the century was rapidly increasing in numbers, was able to send, over a period of years, up to three hundred Brothers to Turkey. After the expulsion of the Brothers from France in 1904 establishments such as St. Joseph's at Kadiköy expanded to such an extent that they could employ eighty Brothers. Several dozen schools, mostly primary, were opened throughout the country. These were supported by the secondary schools which included one boarding school.

Following the peace treaties, exchanges of population between the Christians of Anatolia and Muslims living in Europe, and the return of many Europeans to their countries of origin, led to a decline in the number of Christians who now form only 0.4% of the population as against one third under the empire. Muslim children replaced Christian children in our schools which had acquired a reputation for excellence.

Since primary education was nationalized we are left with only three secondary schools which serve the children of well-to-do parents. The Brothers have got older, some have died and others have returned to France to resume their apostolate, interrupted in 1904. The last Brothers to come here were those from Bulgaria when the Communists seized power there in 1948. Since then our numbers have steadily decreased until only twelve remain to run three schools: one in Izmir and two in Istanbul. The boarding department of one of the latter has now been closed and the other handed over to lay teachers.

The Brothers' work is confined to these schools which are dependent on the Ministry of Education for their programmes (Franco-Turkish), their intake (decided by the Ministry of Education on the results of competitive examinations), and for their fees which are their only source of income. Under such constraints the Brothers follow their usual policy of running the schools under the supervision of a Turkish deputy Principal while they take charge of departments or teach certain subjects. By taking on excessive work loads a small number of Brothers is just about able to keep the schools open, but it is obvious that 12 cannot do the work of 80, and locally recruited staff, despite their good will, cannot compare with Christian laymen such as, for example, you find in France.

Other forms of work have been tried in recent years such as that in the Popular Education Centres (a unique creation of Atatürk in the 30's but now closed following the troubles which almost led to civil war in 1980) and in the University of Istanbul (in the advanced school for language teachers). This work, though promising, has been suspended. Last year, for one term, a Brother, together with an Assumptionist Sister, was invited to give a course in French to a group of young teachers in the faculty of Islamic theology — an interesting experiment in a reputedly closed milieu if ever there was one!

These restrictions have discouraged those who are on the spot and dissuaded others from coming here. In 1980 Brother Superior General had to take a firm stand before 500 Brothers meeting at Beauvais to prevent the French Brothers from abandoning completely this sector. On

the contrary, he encouraged them to reinforce the Brothers still in Turkey with these words, "It would be a disgrace to abandon a sector because conditions are difficult. That is precisely where we should be."

If, indeed, one is not discouraged by the lack of immediate and spectacular results and if one believes in sowing in order to reap then it is not difficult to see the importance of such work (that of the Brothers and other foreign religious who work in schools and hospitals and who witness by their faith and service of others to the goodness of Christ).

There is first of all the simple work of the school, valid here as elsewhere, in the development of intelligence, mind and heart, work of the first importance to the numerous young people of a poor country and the basis of its long term development. The work of former students, now in key positions in every sector of the nation's life, gives proof of this. None of them is to be found in the ranks of migrant workers in Europe. On the contrary, their initiative provides work for their fellow countrymen at home.

Then there is the daily silent mixing of Muslim, Jewish and Christian pupils, though the latter are becoming less and less numerous. The bonds of friendship thus created lead naturally to the disappearance of misconceptions and prejudices, source of so much conflict in the Middle East between those who believe in the same God, and prepare minds for a life in common where differences are accepted and respected.

Finally, this work has other moral and spiritual aspects. Our disinterested service causes the Muslims amongst whom we live and work to regard Christians in a more favourable light. In the eyes of most Muslims Christians are the western heirs to the Crusaders, dominating the world by their technology (a technology which Muslims must learn from them), infidels who have betrayed their own religious message and whose morals are degraded like those of the tourists seen naked on the beaches.

When they meet Christians who are genuinely willing to serve them and whose morals are above reproach their suspicions are allayed and give place to respect and sympathy leading to close collaboration in work and eventually to serious dialogue even in matters of religion. This is always on condition that we show a total respect for them as persons and for their faith. Any form of proselytism is quickly detected and instantly rejected. On the other hand, an attitude of genuine love which sees in each person the image God has put there, encourages that person to express himself freely and to speak of problems which worry him and which we, ourselves, could never introduce.

At the beginning and, perhaps, for a very long time, "we must not so much *talk* about Jesus as *be* Jesus present in the midst of them" according to the well-known formula based on the mystery of Christ's life in Nazareth: thirty years of prayer, silence and ordinary life to prepare for three years of public ministry. This is true, no doubt, of many kinds of evangelization but is absolutely necessary in a Muslim milieu. Thirteen centuries of stormy relations between Muslim and Christian and the multiple snares posed by inherited ideas and vocabulary such as "Trinity", "Son of God", "Prophet", "Transmission and alteration of the Scriptures"... have created a veritable mine-field. It is a wise precaution, before entering into serious dialogue, to be aware of our lack of vocabulary to express our concept of God.

It rarely happens, though it is becoming more frequent, outside our schools, that certain people pursue to the end their quest of Christ. Then the problem of helping such people arises. This is a very delicate matter because of the difference of mentality, the hostility of the milieu and the traditional reluctance of Christian communities to accept them. This is part of the unforeseeable that cannot be written into a work contract and that requires great discretion. But we can all try when we know that, in any case, God has gone before us and invites us to follow in His footsteps.

"Follow me... you will see greater marvels yet" (John 1,50).

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