



LEARNING FROM THOSE WE TEACH

03-E-08

PRAYER

It is you, Lord, who made me a human being. You did so that I might know and love you. Everything around us is meant to serve us and to bring us closer to one another and to you. But we are slow to understand your goodness and wisdom and slower still to do what you require of us. Yet in spite of our reluctance, our blindness and our rebellion you multiply your appeals, your gestures of pardon and encouragement... Praised be you Lord, for what you have done for us.

I believe, Lord, that it was you who asked me to change communities in 1970. I came to Beauvais where I was welcomed by nine Brothers who worked in an agricultural college. At the beginning it took me some time to grasp what was expected of me in the formation of students who had come here to follow a five year course in engineering. So, although I was a teacher in the school I had, myself, to learn like everyone else who changes occupation. I had to try to establish relations with the other teachers. I consulted books and tried to be attentive to the reactions of the students. You, Lord, kept me from being discouraged while I learned from others. Thanks, Lord, for the prayers and advice of those who helped me. Pardon my stubbornness and rash judgement of others.

There's another thing I want to recall, Lord. It was the suppression of compulsory religious instruction for the boys of the first cycle. The need I had to learn from others made me too sensitive to the negative criticism of religious instruction by a large number of students. It produced a crisis which we solved as best we could. The passage of time together with more experience has made me realise that we lack the human formation in depth and, perhaps, the intense spirituality needed to give a religious education rich and accessible to all- believers and unbelievers alike.

In the years that followed I was tempted to doubt my usefulness in that school. In fact the greater part of my time was not spent in making you known. Only a very small number of students came for religious instruction. Little by little and thanks to conversations, community meetings, reading etc., I came to understand how my way of life could be the bearer of a message capable of awakening in young people the desire to seek you. In this way I realized that we could teach by example, by our mode of life, and that we would be imitated in our search for God. That is why, when we cannot speak explicitly of you because of the hostility of men or of our own deficiencies you ask us to be still more vigilant in cultivating attitudes which speak very clearly of you. Grant Lord, that we may be ever more prepared to let your light shine through us.

I want to thank you also, you who are always so anxious for our good, for having allowed one of my students to make me acquainted with an association in the town of Beauvais, a group of young and not so young people who collected scrap after working hours. I became a pupil of that student who introduced me to the Association of Youth for Mutual Aid and Development (AJED). That was in 1972.

The following year it was decided to devote part of the funds raised from the sale of the scrap to helping families in the region who received no aid from the social services, public or voluntary. I was asked to take charge of this work with the help of a full-time worker for the Association. In this way I came into contact with families in all kinds of difficulties: homelessness, unemployment, illness, death or desertion of a partner, alcoholism...

In company with other members of the Association I spent many an evening listening to men and women who tried to make us understand something of their situation as emarginated, as rejects from the affluent society.

About two years later Yvon and Marie-Thérèse, members of the Association, told me about an appeal for help made by the Parish Priest of the parish where the school is situated. They had been deeply touched by the priest's appeal for a family living not far from us in an "emergency" housing estate. That priest had taught Yvon and Marie-Thérèse. They contacted the family and gradually became aware that they needed to learn a lot before they could deal positively with the problems they encountered.

Within the AJED we formed a little study and action group for just that. About 1975 we thought we should get to know the area where the family lived. Studying reports of visits made to families in trouble, discussing them with social workers, and with advice from the Movement for Aid to All in Distress, founded by Fr. Joseph Wrésinsky for the "Fourth World", we prepared ourselves for over a year before venturing into the "transit" estate.

You know, Lord, that we hesitated for a long time before making a move. We had heard so much about the people in the estate: "They're a crowd of good for nothings". "They spend their time drinking and fighting" – "They live at public expense" etc...

Then one day, doubtless urged on by yourself, Lord, we went to a vacant lot in the estate. It was January, 1976 and snow had fallen. I was with Yvon and Marie-Thérèse and two Brothers from the school, Claude, a teacher and Jean-Marie, a student. We arrived there like the members of ATD when they organise what they call a cultural pivot or street library. We had two worn carpets which we put on the ground, some books, some games and puzzles, paper and pencils. In a short while children gathered around. Some read with us for a while, others played games or tried the puzzles while others drew. We continued each Saturday to the following June. The numbers of children increased and we gradually became accustomed to their aggressiveness which became intense towards the end of the session. They tore the books and stoned us as we left. On Saturday evenings we made a report on the day's work.

In the year that followed, under your guidance, Lord, we continued our efforts to learn from our contacts with the children and their parents. We were also helped by the experience of the members of the ATD movement. While learning from the children I think we were acting a little like you, Lord. We came closer to the poor children of the estate which we visited. It was because we were willing to learn from them that they began to do as we did and to learn from life what it is right to do and not do.

Later on, in collaboration with the Municipal Library, we organized a lending library for the children, giving each one a library ticket. Gradually the number of readers reached 110. In this way we got to know the families of the children better and a little later were happy to find adults asking to borrow books also. Was this not a kind of school? In the process we became aware that some of the adults could not read or did not understand what they read. Lord, should we not do something about that also?

With the help of the students of the agricultural college we organized workshops and excursions for the children on Wednesday afternoons. I have just found, Lord, what a student wrote in November, 1977:

"I ask myself what is the point of going to these slum areas to visit people of no importance in so-called 'transit' or 'emergency' townships around Beauvais which at most form only a tiny part of the 'Fourth World'. Still that is how a team of eight or nine students have passed their Wednesday afternoons since the All Saints holidays." It is difficult to know what urges them to give their time to children who have no other school but the street.

"My first impression was favourable thanks to the welcome of the children who were at once surprised to see us, curious, suspicious, outspoken but also amused. What struck me later was the aggressiveness of these children among themselves and towards us. They swear at each other and at us. They fight and try to appear tough... I believe this is due to the lack of affection in their lives. These children need to feel loved by someone and not to be treated as unfortunate rejects of society".

Reading between these lines written by a student called Etienne, one can guess that there is for him, and certainly for others, a call to learn from these poor children whom they have encountered:

"I believe this experience to be beneficial, not on the intellectual plane but because of the psychological effects it has on us. It lets us see a world totally different from the one in which we live. It shows the absurdity of two worlds which are unaware of each other's existence and yet live side by side. On the other hand it makes us realise that we are the privileged few, that we are the lucky ones, that we must change our way of life which rejects them because they do not belong to our milieu. Besides, it takes us out of our egoism and narrow-mindedness."

If these students have been able to stick to this work for one, two, or three years, in the case of some, it is perhaps, Lord, because you placed in their path people who had learned and had taught them something.

In 1977 we tried to make a methodical study of the population of the "transit" township which we visited each week. With the help of a lady Counsellor in social and family welfare we learned that the great majority were French citizens, that 38% were under 18 and that 55% of adults earned no wages.

We also carried out a study in the schools of the neighbouring residential area by contacting the Principals and the teachers.

We found that of 137 children from the residential sector 122 were in normal classes and 15 in special classes, that is classes for those who were retarded, lacking motivation or disruptive. On the other hand, out of 58 children from the "transit" township 19 were in normal classes and 39 in special classes. Lastly, in one of the schools in the area we learned the following facts concerning children from the "transit" area:

- at the beginning of school, that is, in the preparatory department, 3 children out of 16 are retarded. None are above average;
- at the end of the preparatory stage 9 out of 10 are retarded by one, two or three years.

These figures strengthened our resolve to do something to remedy this injustice. Perhaps it was you, Lord, who inspired us to act, for you said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after justice..."

In the months that followed, our plan of action took shape. It consisted in offering to the children who wanted it a period on one day of the week between 5 and 7 o'clock in the evening for revision of the work they had done that day or the previous days in school. We became aware, early on, that we could not limit ourselves to school work. Quite a lot of educational work could be done through games, conversation, mimes etc... As soon as we learned that we could use the time in a flexible manner and for a variety of activities we began to speak of A.D.S.-evening activities. We could find no more precise term. We did not want to speak of remedial classes or school work so as not to remind the children and their parents of scholastic failure. With about 50 children helped by 40 adults I think we are providing individual attention for children who are seldom listened to at home and who feel out of place in an ordinary school.

It seems to me that an adult is able to influence and educate a child to the extent that he or she is prepared to learn from the child as a human person. This is a necessary condition for the development of the full human potential of both the child and the adult.

In short, the discovery of our inability to help the young and not so young of the "transit" township compelled us to learn from others and to realise that this basic attitude is an important factor in our approach to the task of educating children.

In 1980, on the initiative of a student who had kept in contact with a group of young people in the township, an association was formed and registered. In 1981 Philippe arrived in the Community. While completing the second year of his novitiate he gradually came into contact with the 120 families of the township. You permitted him, Lord, to understand better through these contacts the nature of the call you addressed to him and to others. Like others before him he learned from the people he met. Because of his presence and help the management of the "Maison du Quartier" (Neighbourhood Centre), recently built by the Municipality, was confided to our association.

In this building, which is meant to be a place of welcome and sharing, the parents meet on Thursdays for social, cultural and domestic sessions. On Mondays and Tuesdays children with reading problems come for help. A workshop for adolescents is in operation on Wednesday afternoons and on Friday evenings a group of young people hold their meetings there. There is still plenty to be learned. I am thinking particularly of those who recently broke into the building during the night and damaged it.

Through joy and suffering Lord, you cease not to offer your light and your strength that we may continue to combat injustice, bring others to you and be a symbol of the Church which brings together your children who are scattered, excluded, sick and in misery.

Lord, grant that we may learn from others so that we may be always your disciples and bearers of your Good News to the world.

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