



04-E-07

## THE BROTHERS' COMMITMENT TO THE POOR OF HAITI

### CONDITIONS IN THE COUNTRY

— Though it has a climate that could easily make of it an earthly paradise, Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the world.

— The population is 83% rural. In the towns 80% of the people live in a state of destitution or near destitution. In rural areas the situation is even more deplorable. 94% of the people live in conditions unfit for human beings.

— The state of health of the people is among the worst in the world. Infant mortality is as high as 150 per 1,000 births compared to Haiti's two neighbours: the Dominican Republic with 43 per 1,000 and Jamaica with 22 per 1,000. 60% of the people suffer from malnutrition.

— An estimated 85% of the population are illiterate. In the towns 89% of children of school-going age get some education but in rural areas only 26% go to school. 50% of children in the towns finish primary school whereas only 4% reach that stage in rural areas. Children are taught through the medium of French but in recent years there is a movement to introduce Creole into the schools.

The country is mountainous with only one seventh of the land suitable for cultivation. Wealthy townspeople own the fertile valleys while the peasants are forced to eke out a living in the barren mountainous areas. At the economic level things are no better. Industry is concentrated in the towns (90% of it in Port-au-Prince). Only two thirds of the rural population earn more than \$40 a year while about 3,000 families in Port-au-Prince have an income exceeding \$100,000 a year.

### SOME HISTORIC LANDMARKS

1974: The first Brother arrives on l'Île de la Tortue. He can expect no reinforcements from Montréal since the novitiate was closed in 1969. Soon he is given charge of the school of the Palmists. In the Autumn, however, two Brothers come to his aid, one from Guadeloupe and one from the Cameroons.

1976: After an unsuccessful attempt in the north east two Brothers begin work in Fatima, a poor quarter of Port-au-Prince.

1977: The Brothers are asked to take over St. Joseph's school from the Brothers of Christian Doctrine of Ploërmel who are leaving Port-au-Prince.

1978: Two new Brothers replace the Brothers of Christian Doctrine in Saint Louis du Nord.

1980: The de Montfort Fathers ask the Brothers to take over the secondary school which serves as a junior seminary.

1982: Two Brothers form a community together with two young teachers who express a wish to become Brothers. This is the beginning of a formation centre.

1984: Next September will see the opening of a novitiate with three novices: two Haitians and a Canadian. Three postulants and seven aspirants, who live in, together with fifteen aspirants who live at home, are preparing to enter the novitiate.

Balance sheet. After ten years there are twenty Brothers, six communities and a promising intake of recruits.

**"GO FORTH FROM THE LAND OF YOUR KINSFOLK AND FROM YOUR FATHER'S HOUSE TO A LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU" (Gen. 12.1)**

Brothers heard that call of God. They left home at an age when most people are thinking of retirement or of a less exacting occupation. They gave up a life which was, perhaps, too easy, well paid posts and comfortable security, to go to a country which, from the material point of view, is among the most deprived on the face of the earth. They heard, more or less clearly, the cry of a people, "poor, afflicted and oppressed" (Dt. 26,7). They left a country where for years the Brothers have been questioning their identity and their mission for a land where the situation is similar to that experienced by St. John Baptist de La Salle in Rheims or Paris and which caused him to write, "The working class and the poor being usually occupied all day in gaining a livelihood for themselves and their families cannot give their children the needed instruction nor a suitable Christian education". (Common Rule and Constitutions of the Brothers of the Christian Schools)

In the social conditions described above we can easily understand how the Brothers rediscovered their identity and their sense of mission in all its actuality. "All disorders, especially among the working class and the poor, usually arise from their having been, in childhood, left to themselves and badly brought up. It is almost impossible to repair this evil at a more advanced age because the bad habits they have acquired are overcome only with great difficulty, and scarcely ever entirely..." (Ibid, 1,6).

In such circumstances, political and economic solutions seem doomed to failure as long as the exploitation of others remains engraved on the hearts of Haitians. Real change, whether political, economic or social can only be brought about through a change of heart. As long as Haitians fail to recognise one another as a brother to be loved and helped rather than as somebody to be used to one's own advantage, then all reforms are worthless.

The principal reason for the Brothers' presence in Haiti is, "to give a Christian education to children by instructing them in the mysteries of our holy religion and by inspiring them with Christian maxims".

**"ONE COMMITMENT LED TO ANOTHER WITHOUT MY HAVING FORESEEN IT FROM THE BEGINNING" (Blain I, 169)**

That is how the Institute began in France. That is how it began in Haiti. A series of circumstances led the Brothers to commit themselves beyond what they had envisaged and, perhaps, beyond the dictates of prudence. As in the case of St. J.B. de La Salle, "God who orders all things with wisdom and sweetness and who does not compel the will of man, did it gradually and imperceptibly". (Ibid.)

In spite of initial hesitations, in spite of misgivings each time a new initiative was considered, the Lord guided the Brothers "suaviter ac fortiter" in the path He wished them to follow. Primary schools, literacy centres, co-operatives and a trade school were all undertakings forced on the Brothers by the circumstances in which they found themselves.

When the first stage was completed there remained the question of priorities. These have now been established. The first priority is the formation of teachers to provide for children and adolescents educators sufficiently committed to their mission to resist the attraction of large centres or foreign countries. With this in view great attention is paid to the pastoral ministry of vocations in order to provide a future nucleus of young men who are prepared to dedicate their lives to the service of the Lord by helping their brothers to escape from the modern forms of slavery which oppress them.

As there is a great need for evangelization of the young we are trying to establish a "Faith School" where, besides strengthening their own faith, young and not so young people will commit themselves to the work of catechesis in the different schools of the towns.

If the Brothers wish to work for the very poorest they must, without abandoning it completely, move away from the well-beaten track of academic education to devote the greater part of their energy and resources to starting trade centres for training in simple trades which young people can practise in their own locality or which will help them find work in production centres.

The Brothers hope that the future Haitian Brothers will be able to gather round them other teachers with whom they can share their ideal of educative service of the poor in schools which draw their inspiration from living Lasallian tradition.

If the Canadian Brothers can call forth and form a first generation of Haitian Lasallians then their stay in Haiti, however short, will not have been in vain.

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