



THEY GAVE MEANING TO MY LIFE

06-E-14

A few days ago, I celebrated in the privacy of my prayers, the 30th anniversary of my first commitment as a religious in the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. I was then nineteen. I was happy then and I am happy still, but in a deeper sense!

You may wish to know what I have done since that first commitment twenty-seven years ago, especially as all my active life has been spent in Africa: Morocco, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and Niger.

"THE SEED HAS BEEN SOWN"

September 1957 saw the realization of a youthful dream: I began teaching on African soil. The early years of my apostolate were marked by several meetings with the "Patriarch of the Atlas", Fr. Peyriguère, who died in 1959 after spending thirty years of his life among the Berbers. A life of prayer and silent presence at the heart of Islam without making a single convert! The strongest impression he made on me was one of faith in the living Good of the Eucharist, Saviour of the milieu in which he lived. His deepest conviction at the end of his life was; "The Seed has been sown"! I have retained the certitude that beyond the visible, God is acting and that the important thing is to render Him present wherever I am, to plant and to water, knowing that the rest is up to Him. That is what gave meaning to my apostolate in the Islamic world.

"THE TREE-TRUNK MAY BE A LONG TIME IN THE WATER BUT IT NEVER BECOMES A CROCODILE"

In 1965 I arrived in black Africa. My activities there were varied: teaching, formation of young Brothers, study of African sociology.

On my first arrival in Africa in 1957, I told myself; "I have come for good. I want to remain a Brother to the end of my life". That seemed to me as natural as it was exhilarating!

But the year 1970 brought a turning point in my missionary thinking. My sociological studies brought me to numerous villages of the Ivory Coast. It was there I heard more than one old man say with some malice "The stranger has big eyes but he sees nothing"! which meant: you're curious, but all you see, all you think you understand, you always see with the eyes of an outsider, with the reasoning of an outsider. You only grasp appearances. To really understand you must belong here!

Others quoted, in the same tone, the Bambara proverb, "The tree-trunk may be a long time in the water but it never becomes a crocodile", which means that even if you've been here a long time you always remain an out-sider! This made me understand that in spite of everything, a deep friendship could exist between people but that it sprang from mutual respect and sharing of what one is and what one has. And I realised that I was only an invited guest on African soil, happy to be so, and to act as such but prepared to accept the possibility of leaving if circumstances compelled me, as we have seen happen in other places.

But at the same time I realised that African wisdom and proverbs have their human limits. Happily, faith and love can overcome them. I felt that, despite appearances, and by sheer force of loving and listening, it was possible to reach a certain identification with the other person. True brotherhood, which knows no barriers, becomes real in Jesus Christ to the point where one feels at home where people really love one another.

It was a great moment for me, when that thought came to me in serenity. It was a little like a second breath to my life in Africa which I am trying to live in a spirit of availability for today as for tomorrow, in receiving as in giving.

"YOU DIDN'T EVEN NOTICE ME"

At the moment I am teaching in Niamey. Practically all the students in our technical college are Moslems. How does one live as a Brother amongst them?

Once in class I had just finished explaining the work to be done. Hands were raised asking for further explanations. I answered the questions and then said, "Get to work, now". But one hand was still raised. It was that of the most backward pupil in the class. I thought to myself: "The Lord invites me to love him. Go down to him and answer his question". Wanting to surprise him I went towards him but without looking at him and passing along the next row of desks. When I reached him and stopped to speak to him he turned towards me and I saw a face filled with utter hopelessness and heard a sorrowful voice say "You didn't even notice me".

The depth of his disappointment surprised me... What he wanted of me was that I should take notice of him at that moment, not afterwards. Of course, I explained matters to him and he was quite happy but I shall always remember the lesson he taught me.

I found the same expectations in letters from senior students of former years who occasionally write to me. One begins his letters with "My Dear Educator"... and after his signature underlines the sentence "*I look forward to hearing from you*".

Another expresses more the goodness of his heart and his eagerness to receive an answer than the truth as regards my behaviour towards him. (This gives me the right to quote him). Unconsciously, he describes the teacher he would wish to have to help him, and that gives food for thought. "I searched my memories of school but I found no face but yours which I could clearly recall: I remember you because you always fulfilled well your duties as educator. You always had time for us young people, you were always available whether in class, in the playground or in your office. You easily joined in the conversation of a group of boys. You could always guide, advise and teach us. You were always patient, smiling, accessible. You knew how to encourage us. You always found something positive and praiseworthy in our work even in a mediocre poem without form or substance. That is why I write to you and ask you to help me." I could answer these young people and tell them that their letters, their attitudes and their reflections help us more than they think, that they sometimes shake us up and often challenge us.

BEING A CHRISTIAN CHANGES ONE'S LIFE

At the centre of this attention to man, which for us means attention to the young people who pass through our schools, lies the wonderful riches of the presence of Jesus, recognized and made actual in our lives. I am more conscious, perhaps, in this Moslem world where He is not really known, that I am His sign, His ambassador. Every time a group of pupils enters my class my prayer goes something like this, "Lord, If my visible role is to teach them the profane subjects they expect from me, my invisible role is to offer their existence, their daily work, their efforts, their fears and sorrows and their more or less conscious expectations as a prayer and a consecration of their lives to you".

It seems to me that my presence amongst them in the faith helps to start something, of which they are not yet conscious, but which for many of them will be lost on the way. To this priesthood of offering, which is the duty of every baptised person, is added the duty of witness through a manner of living and acting which surprises and challenges; "Be ready at all times to explain the hope you have in you" (1 Peter, 3,15). In a country where Christians form only 1% of the population a person must live Christianity 99%, — a Christianity which is a sign of the love of God for men and which calls forth the action of the Holy Spirit everywhere.

How encouraging to hear this statement from a Moslem student at the end of the year: "Being a Christian changes one's life".

To spend one's life transmitting something of the love of God incarnate in Jesus Christ, is this not to live one's life genuinely and to the fullest?

It is to live through the season of sowing, and therefore of hope!

MY HEART IS READY LORD (Ps. 57.8)

I said at the beginning of this article that I was happy... I have, in fact, been happy throughout my stay in Africa, a stay marked by frequent changes of place because of the work I was asked to do.

These successive uprootings, in the service of a common cause, however trying they may have been, convinced me, in their own way, that the only "incarnation" demanded of us, and which removes all illusion, is that which coincides with the will of God expressed in our readiness to accept events.

Then nothing surprises, nothing disappoints: the heart is ready to listen to the invitation of Peter (1 Peter 4,10-11).

EACH ONE AS A GOOD MANAGER OF GOD'S DIFFERENT GIFTS,
MUST USE FOR THE GOOD
OF OTHERS THE SPECIAL GIFT HE HAS RECEIVED FROM GOD.
WHOEVER PREACHES MUST PREACH GOD'S MESSAGE;
WHOEVER SERVES MUST SERVE WITH THE STRENGTH
THAT GOD GIVES HIM, SO THAT IN ALL THINGS
PRAISE MAY BE GIVEN TO GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.

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