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A NEW APOSTOLATE FOR RETIRED BROTHERS

WORKING WITH PRISONERS...

Pierre who retired from teaching six years ago is a member of a team of prison visitors to the prison of S... Like each of the other visitors he talks in private every week with five or six prisoners who wish to see him. He makes these weekly visits throughout the period they are in prison (from a few weeks to several years). This apostolate of listening to the inmates also involves a great variety of activities: contact with the families, interviews with prospective employers, repeated visits to the social services, etc. Pierre is also lay assistant to the Catholic chaplain and as such takes thirty or forty prisoners for prayer and reflection on a Gospel text as the occasion offers.

AND WITH EX-PRISONERS...

André, who is a joiner, works full time with three companions in a workshop belonging to an Association which employs them as specialist instructors. In the workshop, which is situated in the country, or on building sites they are helped by six young men aged from 18 to 24 whom the Association places in their care for a period of six months and pays for their work. For fifty hours a week the "apprentices" work side by side with the instructors and take their mid-day meal with them.

Accepted as they are, often in a state of physical and moral exhaustion, these young men, from whom no life history or court record is demanded, gradually awaken to the reality of life and to relationships they have never before experienced. Rejection and repeated failure had led them to delinquency and prison.

As time passes each finds his place, takes an interest in his work, learns to handle his budget, pays his debts (court costs, compensation to victims etc.) and begins to stand on his own feet. However, nothing can be guaranteed and you don't always win, but for many of these young men the work periods have been the road to social and professional integration into society.

..FOR THE SALVATION OF ALL THE PEOPLE

Pierre and André live in the same Community. They are Brothers of the Christian Schools. The people they deal with have a strange resemblance to the "children of artisans and the poor" of whom St. J-B de La Salle used to say that their parents were "compelled to abandon them".

It is to these "overgrown children", in a milieu little conducive to friendliness, that educators, visitors and chaplains must act as "brothers". Is this possible without convictions which must be continually renewed and affirmed? Some of these convictions are not entirely foreign to Lasallian tradition.

— God wishes the salvation of ALL men without exception. How many, before going to prison, had a chance to hear the Word of God?

— A man is still a man whatever the obstacles he met on his path: heredity, lack of affection, bad habits, etc... No man can wipe out the past, but to feel that he is respected for what he is can help a man to accept himself with his past and to take his future in hand.

— The message brought by the person who visits and supports the prisoner must be conditioned by the prisoner's actual daily experience. How can he become a self-respecting man if he finds in the depressing reality of his daily life no motive for hope?

Separated from his family... suffering from drug withdrawal... from the constant tension between the desire to "kick" the habit and the fear of relapsing... from solitude or the promiscuity of the cell, from loss of personality in the face of abuse from tyrannical warders... addresses exchanged in the exercise yard in preparation for a "job" after release... release with a miserable pittance for a man without family, without lodging, without work...

HAS THE GOSPEL NOTHING TO SAY ABOUT SUCH SITUATIONS?

— The building up of the Church — or of a more human world — is also the task of lay people including those temporarily detained. In the closed and regimented world of the prison, which is hardly conducive to a sense of responsibility, the practice of religion is the only way by which a prisoner can develop as a full human being. The awareness that he has something to share is, for the ex-convict, an antidote to withdrawal into himself with all its fatal consequences.

THE ROOTS OF THIS EVIL

It is not easy to unravel their tangled mass. It is easier to recognize the soil and climate which favour their proliferation.

— **Unhappy or one-parent families.** Gérard, abandoned by his unmarried mother and passed from one foster mother to another... Claude, beaten, up to the age of fourteen, by a drunken father who was finally deprived of his paternal rights... Maurice

who can no longer live with his drunken father. He ran away at the age of twelve to join a gang of car thieves... Daniel, torn between divorced parents...

— **Schools where one is unfairly treated.** Handicapped by poor eyesight and speech difficulties and classed as good-for-nothing, Louis finished school at the age of sixteen in a "deadend" class. Unemployed... two attempts at suicide... involved in a drugs network. Other boys from poor but decent families were not able to keep up and became disgusted with everything and with themselves. "Nobody bothered about me in school and it was there I first started to go wrong" is a refrain often heard in the prison. Three drug addicts began to sniff glue in 5th year under the very nose of the teacher...

— **High density housing areas with mixed cosmopolitan populations.** It is there more than in purely working class districts that young people feel excluded and, in protest, join rival gangs. Mahomet, revolted by being always suspected and blamed in the wrong, joined such a gang. Edward aged nine was rejected by the other children in the block where he lived. He ran away and joined a similar gang.

— **Lonely adolescence.** After a childhood without trouble and in surroundings neither better nor worse than those of others, they committed their first crime at the age of fifteen or sixteen. Why? Who knows? If you listen patiently for a long time you can guess the reason: depressing loneliness. "It was impossible to discuss anything with my father". "Everybody was against me". "I never had a companion". Then followed the flight from home, the desire to become somebody by acting the "hard man", an unfortunate introduction to drugs, the appearance of suicidal tendencies. Alain swallowed a tube of barbiturates, drove a car through the window of a pharmacy and got himself arrested saying, "Now I'll bother nobody".

SECURITY - PREVENTION

Under these titles local associations are being formed in the areas of greatest risk. Conscious of the fact that the disruption of family ties is at the root of delinquency and violence they want to develop a dynamic of neighbourhood friendliness between the generations, social classes and ethnic groups. They are trying to create a movement of active solidarity among the local population to include:

- old people who live alone and who have been the victims of robbery with violence or who are likely to become so,
- young people out of control including those with police records,
- families unable to do anything for the education of their children.

With the help of well-wishers they are slowly forming groups of social workers, providing meeting places, youth centres, family counselling and conciliation with a view to obtaining compensation without having to call in the police.

The participation of teachers and educators in such projects would make for a better understanding of the needs and aspirations of the young.

— Joy and affection in a secure environment would ease the child's anxiety which is the cause of aggressivity and lack of self confidence.

— The child, especially if he is withdrawn, needs to be able to discover, build and play with other children, to express himself, and to be listened to by adults, if he is to fit into society.

— The adolescent who feels rejected needs to meet older people, adults who take an interest in him, take him seriously and trust him, if he is to find a motive for living and making an effort to better himself.

— Respect for the wish of young people to be and to act together, for their desire to be themselves and to be responsible for their future, acceptance of their tastes and their refusal of regimentation make it possible for them to develop into mature adults.

To consider them capable of joining together in collective action for humanitarian or social ends, to encourage them to do so or to ask them to do a favour is to give them a chance to show the better side of themselves. It could help a gang of adolescent delinquents to sublimate their aggressive tendencies into action for the common good.

WHAT CAN THE SCHOOL DO?

- To combat all forms of racism and the mechanisms of exclusion which are factors leading to anti-social behaviour,
- to discover, in the early stages, handicaps and behaviour problems capable of seriously disturbing the personality of the young person,
- to help a disturbed adolescent to understand and solve his interior conflicts, to make him conscious of his potential and of his limitations, of everything in him which could lead to delinquency,
- to help each student to realize his full potential, to become a useful member of society and to give a meaning to his life.

The following lines do not pretend to give the answers. They are meant to provoke the critical reaction of the reader:

— A school adapted and open to its environment, taking the means to combat scholastic failure, to minimize cultural inequalities, to encourage, while respecting differences, dialogue and mutual enrichment, to develop manual skills as well as mental ability and to care for the affective needs of the students.

— Constant vigilance, close collaboration with the family which must be made aware of its responsibility, recourse to competent authorities, such as the social services etc. Can a single teacher in a primary school cope with all these demands? Does the boarding school not encourage families to avoid their responsibilities?

— A system of education which emphasises the quality of relationships within the educative community and particularly between students and teachers. Support and care for the young person in difficulty... Responsibility given to the students, encouragement of initiative, a sense of solidarity and self evaluation, not only of school work but of the effort put into it and of behaviour within the peer group...

— In order to provide the students with better direction in their studies and careers and to make them aware of social realities, take every opportunity to arrange contacts between them and people engaged in work, in the struggle for justice and in the fight against all forms of poverty and oppression...

Learning from a friend how other people have given direction to their lives and how much the world has need of hearts and hands is an invitation to a young person not to allow himself to become a prisoner of his own immediate interests, of his dream of economic success or even of suffocatingly close family ties.

A.A. and P.B.
of R... Community