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A BROTHER WORKS WITH YOUNG IMMIGRANTS IN BRUSSELS

When I arrived in Brussels in 1970 my intention was to work in the schools with immigrant children and to live a new form of community life in an ordinary house in a working class district.

Several years ago I redefined my objective as "to be with and to live among them". They are the Turkish, Moroccan and Albanian families who form 70 to 80% of the population of the district where I live. For the past ten years I have lived in a little apartment with two rooms.

My manner of life, the relations that it involves, my activities in the area and the time I have spent there constitute for me a human, social and cultural experience which has enriched my life and which justifies amply the exceptional character of my situation as a Brother detached from my Community to lead a privileged existence.

My work involves five different forms of activity.

IN THE SCHOOLS

In 1968 the Belgian government created "crash courses in the language used in teaching" for immigrant children. That was all it did up to 1982. The conditions for establishing such courses were so restrictive and held so little interest for the teaching profession that they met with little enthusiasm on the part of administrators or teachers. One day, a priest who was seriously concerned with the problem, said to me, "That is a task for religious".

That is why I am now teaching in three schools in this area. I give lessons for six hours a week in each school to groups of from 2 to 8 children. That is the maximum allowed under government regulations.

Two of these little primary schools with 150 and 210 pupils respectively, have no Belgian children. Three quarters of the pupils are Turks. Educationally they are very retarded because they do not know French sufficiently. Not only do they get no help at home but they speak Turkish all the time in the family, in the street, at school and even in class where they are in the majority. That does not help their French!

For the past three years the Belgian authorities have allowed additional teaching staff in schools with a high proportion of immigrant children but these teachers are sent there by government order or are students in training or part of a pool of peripatetic teachers. This makes for a dissatisfied, discontented and unstable staff and the unfortunate children are not only retarded but neglected in the weakest sector of the educational system.

Are these not the type of children that John-Baptist de La Salle would care for today?

ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG IMMIGRANTS

This Association, founded with the help of two friends, has as its object the establishment of classes and workshops for the numerous young immigrants who cannot gain admission to ordinary schools because they do not know French, are too old, too backward or arrive from their country of origin in the middle of the school year.

After four years as a private organization, the Association is now recognized by the Ministry of Education as a branch of the Institut Technique de La Salle de Molenbeck. It is a trade school with a five year course in technology... geared to the needs of immigrants. In fact, more and more of these young people are looking for the kind of school which will welcome them and adapt its programme to their needs and help them solve the problems they face in a foreign environment.

With our 80 Turkish and Moroccan students we are well acquainted with such problems as backwardness, failure, drop-out, expulsion, indiscipline, delinquency, family troubles, etc. Much is said and written today about this second generation of immigrants, without roots, without social structures, without education and without work.

Nine years ago we thought we had only to teach them French. Today we are faced with a multiplicity of problems and here again the State offers little help and shows less understanding of the abnormal situations with which we have to deal and which do not fit neatly into administrative norms.

At present, a team of 15 people (some part-time) look after these 80 youths. The majority of these teachers are particularly interested in this kind of school and try to make the programme interesting to these boys whose past has been nothing but repeated failure. Teaching has to be on a personal level because their levels of education are very different. Account is taken of their ethnic problems by providing teachers of their own nationality, Turk or Moroccan. Some of these teachers also act as social workers among the students from their own ethnic group.

Personally I no longer teach class, but look after administration and finances as a member of the Administration Council which is responsible for the running of the establishment.

LE RASQUINET

This is a centre to which the children of the area come for tuition and help with their homework after school. It also provides workshops where the children can develop their skills in the evenings and on school holidays, as well as a sports field for games.

It has been in operation since 1972 and during that time hundreds of young Belgians have come here to help organize different activities. During the summer vacation 150 children used the playing field or took part in the summer camps which we organized.

At present we are finding difficulty in getting young Belgians to help supervise these activities so we have had to limit the number of children admitted to the evening classes and to the workshops.

The evening classes meet an evident need. I have mentioned above the failures and backwardness experienced by the children of immigrants. This is due to unfavourable conditions at home where the parents cannot help the children with their homework, the living quarters are overcrowded, and the families large. The children's future progress is determined by the education received in the primary schools. At 15 or 16 (at least before the law which extended the duration of school attendance) they leave school and can only gain admission to trade schools where many of them never finish the course. The serious problems encountered by immigrant youth stem from their failure in the primary schools. Consequently, the best means of preventing these problems in the future is to help the children who are finding difficulty at primary school level.

CENTRE FOR TURKISH YOUTH AT SCHAEBEEK

This centre, opened a year ago, meets the needs and the demand of young people for a place where they can meet in comfort. Many of them pass their leisure hours in the parks, the public squares and in City II (a covered commercial centre). There they gather in bands; some in conflict with their parents, others victims of rejection, exclusion and racial prejudice. They easily turn to crime and commit acts of theft, burglary and aggression which give them a bad reputation and attract the particular attention of the forces of law and order.

The youth centre tries to cater for these turbulent and sometimes violent youngsters and to prevent, as far as possible, their involvement in crime. To this end we organize cultural and sporting activities, help to solve their personal and social problems and to create among them a positive and responsible attitude to life.

The various activities of the centre are organized and supervised by some of the older Turkish members while I act as advisor and councillor and public relations officer with other youth organizations and associations and with the public authorities. This requires my constant presence among them. The mentality of Turks and Maroccans, their way of looking at things, their way of doing things and their social structure are so different from ours that it is very difficult to get them to work together for a common end. It demands infinite patience. Besides a meeting place and a gaming table they are not interested in any other form of social activity.

IN THE CAFES

The majority of Turkish and Moroccan men spend a considerable amount of time in the cafés. As two men out of every three are unemployed, the cafés are crowded all day to the disgust of Belgians who do not understand that café life is an integral part of the culture of these immigrants. In my district alone there are no less than 22 Turkish cafés to serve this important clientèle. Some of them are frequented by the older men while others are favoured by the young people, those between 18 and 30 years of age. It's in the cafés I find most of my acquaintances: fathers of pupils, former students or youths who have been members of the Rasquinet club. There, where they really feel at home, I am welcomed with open arms. They appreciate my keeping in contact with them and we can discuss our common problems in spite of the interminable card games which I have to watch for long periods before I can get down to discussion with the players. I spend most evenings and week-ends in the cafés because my presence there is one of the most important elements in my apostolate of being "with them".

I get to know and understand many things there, though I do not know their language. These moments of friendship and confidence help me to overlook what, to me, is negative and unacceptable in their customs. At least, it enables me to see things in their proper context and to form a fair judgement.

CONCLUSION

I get a lot of satisfaction from this work which makes up for the disappointments, hardships and worry inherent in the situation. But what I find hardest to bear is the inability of these Moslem men to understand my voluntary celibacy. That forms an insurmountable barrier between us — an inexplicable mystery. I feel deeply the fact that I cannot get through to them on this matter which they frequently bring up in conversation, but they can accept no other way of life but their own.

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