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To the public at large and even to his brothers in religion Brother Scubilion is practically unknown. Now, after a long period "in the desert" he is beginning to make the headlines. The Church, which in 1984 declared that he had practised all the virtues to a heroic degree, will probably declare him "blessed" in the near future. He will then take his place, as one of the glories of our Institute, alongside Saints Benildus and Miguel, Blessed Salomon and Blessed Mutien-Marie. A striking miracle, attributed to his intercession, is now undergoing rigorous examination by a medical commission. Miracle or no miracle, his reputation for holiness in the island of Réunion is such that the "vox populi" may soon be recognized as the "vox Dei".

But who is Brother Scubilion? When did he live? What relevance has he for today? In answer to these questions we are going to publish a series of four leaflets in "Lasalliana" on the life of Brother Scubilion. They are condensed from a book by the present writer which is about to be published (1). The reader will find therein ample documentation if these notes have succeeded in awakening his interest in Brother Scubilion.

Let us then, make the acquaintance of Brother Scubilion, beginning with some names and dates from his life story. His family name was Jean-Bernard Rousseau, a name made famous in history and literature by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Scubilion was the name of a saintly Norman monk of the sixth century. It was given to Jean-Bernard Rousseau the day he put on the habit of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. He was born in the French province of Burgundy in 1797. His adopted country was the distant French colony of Réunion, an island off the coast of Madagascar, where he died in 1867.

His life was divided into two almost equal parts: thirty-six years in France from 1797 to 1833 and thirty-four in Bourbon (2) (Réunion) from 1833 to 1867. In number of years the two periods were almost equal, but in impact they were vastly different. His years in France would have been consigned to oblivion were it not for his years of missionary activity in Réunion. Passionately interested in evangelization, Brother Scubilion left France with no wish or intention of returning. Today in his native diocese and even in his native village he is completely forgotten. An evangelical paradox. He is forgotten precisely because he gave himself totally to his adopted country as a missionary.

In Réunion, now a French department, Brother Scubilion is **SOMEBODY**. He is part of the common patrimony and collective memory of the island's population. They have not forgotten the humble Brother of the Christian Schools who landed on their island in 1833 and who, at a key moment in their history, became the friend, the teacher and, especially, the catechist of the slaves before their emancipation in 1848. He announced to them a Gospel of freedom! He died at his task among them and is buried among them at Sainte-Marie.

One hundred and eighteen years after his death a strong current of popular devotion draws crowds to his tomb. They come to honour a man who radiated Christ, who became the slave of the slaves, and who, long before the expression was heard of, made "a preferential choice in favour of the poorest".

## THE STAGES OF HIS LIFE

Let us now go into more detail. Jean-Bernard Rousseau spent his childhood and youth in the little Burgundian village of Tharoiseau (376 inhabitants in 1806) near Vézelay, the important centre of Romanesque art. He was baptized secretly because the Revolution had banned public religious ceremonies. There was no resident priest in Tharoiseau up to 1818. Education remained disrupted for years so that Jean-Bernard's early schooling was rather inadequate. He never completely made up for this during the rest of his life. However, he did acquire enough knowledge to enable him to teach primary classes (3). He did this with success because he was a born teacher. As

(1) André Ferét: "A l'île de La Réunion, un évangile de liberté. Frère Scubilion: Jean-Bernard Rousseau". Preface by Msgr. Aubry, Bishop of Réunion. Desclée et Brouwer, February 1985, 264 pages.

N.B. Hyacinthe Chassignon wrote a biography of Brother Scubilion in 1902. It was based on sound historic documents. Evidence as to the holiness of Brother Scubilion was remarkably consistent. The present writer has drawn on it.

(2) The island of Réunion was known as Bourbon before 1848.

(3) By an agreement arrived at by the French Government and the Superior of the Brothers, any Brother, on presentation of a letter of obedience from his Superior, was given the right to teach as long as he remained in the congregation.

a young man he occasionally assisted the village teacher to the satisfaction of the people and of the new parish priest, the Abbé Darcy, who encouraged him to join the Brothers of the Christian Schools who had recently opened a school in Avallon (1819).

He made his novitiate in Paris (1822-23) at a period when the new generations of Brothers were formed in close contact with the courageous veterans who had come through, often at the risk of their lives, the dark days of the Terror. The early years of the nineteenth century were for the Institute "a second spring" and Brother Scubilion left the novitiate filled with the spirit of faith and of zeal characteristic of the early disciples of De La Salle.

For the next ten years he taught the lower classes or looked after the garden or kitchen in Alençon, Poitiers and Chinon.

But already his zeal for spreading the Good News was at work within him and he asked to be allowed to go to a missionary country. Just then (1833) the Minister for the Colonies asked the Superior General for Brothers for the distant and neglected island of Réunion. Three volunteers took ship from Bordeaux and after a voyage lasting 84 days, reached their destination. Among the three were Brother Scubilion and Brother Jean de Matha. The latter deserves mention because, as Superior of the Brothers in the colony, he founded a network of schools for boys between 1835 and 1870. Every little township on the island had a Brothers' school with names like a litany of the saints: Saint-Denis, Saint-Paul, Saint-Benoît, Saint-Leu, Saint-Pierre, Sainte-Marie...

Brother Scubilion easily took his place in this tightly organized body of religious teachers who followed an austere rule of life and who kept schools "together and by association", in the colony as in the home country, according to a set of pedagogical principles, rigorous and well-tried. He taught at Saint-Benoît and Saint-Pierre from 1833 to 1843. The pupils were, of course, the children of white parents. The slaves who, at that time, formed more than half the population, had no right to education, not even to catechism (4).

It was while he was at Saint-Leu (1843-1850) that he was, at last, able to devote himself to teaching catechism to the slaves. Père Monnet, "the Father of the Blacks" had been the courageous pioneer in this work of redemption. Slavery was abolished in 1848 while Brother Scubilion was still at Saint-Leu. But long before that date he had abolished the distance himself and these oppressed people, telling them that they also were the beloved children of God.

The township called La Possession was the centre of his apostolate among the recently freed slaves (1850-55). The obstacles put in the way of evangelization of the slaves by their owners before 1848 were such that, in fact, many of them were neither instructed nor baptized. Brother Scubilion had to gather them around him, teach them the elements of faith and prepare them for the sacraments. He tried also to make them honest, hardworking citizens, worthy of their newly found freedom.

The last ten years of his missionary life were spent at Sainte-Marie, a recent foundation in the north of the island. According to his Superior, Brother Jean de Matha, "The zeal of Brother Scubilion knew no bounds and, at Sainte-Marie, had gone beyond all bounds". He was now in his sixties and still busy teaching catechism to the freed slaves and to the free workers recently imported from India. He collaborated closely with the parish priest whom he called his "vicar", in visiting the sick and the fishermen who feared the "soutane" — the priest's, not his! He also helped the priest to erect a Way of the Cross and two little oratories to Our Lady of La Salette and Saint Joseph (5).

In 1866 he saw the dream of his life come true. A community of Brothers was established in Madagascar, the large neighbouring island. Unfortunately, he was not able to go there himself. Thirty-five years in a tropical climate together with the rigours of a missionary life had undermined even his robust constitution.

After a painful illness he died on 13th April, 1867. On the following day, Palm Sunday, the people of Sainte-Marie, who had lost "their old Brother", their "saint", honoured him with a triumphal procession, combining it with that of the Lord himself.

This was not a passing gesture. For the people of Sainte-Marie, with whom he had formed strong ties of friendship, Brother Scubilion still lives in the glory of the Risen Christ.

A strong feeling of veneration welled up around his tomb at Sainte-Marie and quickly spread to the rest of the island. It was a spontaneous movement which grew rapidly so that on the anniversary of his death scores of thousands of people flock to his tomb. This movement must, however, be directed if it is not to become merely a seeking of favours. Msgr. Aubry, Bishop of Réunion, and his clergy are very much aware of this. He told the pilgrims in 1983, "Don't look for miracles. Brother Scubilion is not a miracle worker. He is a missionary of unity. Return to your homes and become missionaries of peace and harmony".

The next leaflet in "Lasalliana" will deal specifically with Brother Scubilion the missionary: "A Brother to those far away".

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(4) There were more than 60,000 slaves in a total population of 110,000.

(5) The apparition of Our Lady at La Salette took place in 1846. Devotion to Our Lady, Refuge of sinners, soon spread to Réunion. The principal shrine was at Sainte-Marie.