



07-B-33

## **ST CASSIAN'S CENTRE: TEN YEARS ON. A PERSONAL ACCOUNT(1)**

St Cassian's Centre, established in 1975 as a residential retreat centre for young people, is about to celebrate its tenth birthday. Here, and in two articles to follow, Bro. Damian Lundy, who was the centre's Director for the first seven of these ten years, offers a personal account of the centre and its work.

### **How was the centre brought into existence and why do people go there?**

During the 1974 Chapter of the English Province of the De La Salle Brothers, I asked the Province to open a residential retreat-centre for young people. The Chapter had already decided to close our Juniorate (a boarding-school for boys aged thirteen to sixteen who were interested in joining the Brothers) and to set up a new team concerned with recruitment and the fostering of vocations, which meant that the large well-equipped country house in rural Berkshire where this pre-Novitiate formation had taken place was available. After the Chapter, I was invited by the Provincial (Bro. Victor) to join the new team, along with Bro. Joseph Hendron and Bro. Dominic Green. I agreed, on the understanding that the team's approach would include the establishment of a retreat-centre. This was accepted as an experiment for three years, beginning in the autumn of 1975. The experiment was to be assessed by the next District Chapter in 1978, with a view to the Centre becoming more established, if necessary in a different setting, or to its ceasing to exist, if the experiment had not been successful. It was also agreed that a financial subsidy would be assured by the Province. The new Centre was to offer to teenagers and young adults the experience of a residential retreat (though some misgivings were expressed about the use of that particular term), directed by the team of three Brothers with the participation of a chaplain a priest who would either be invited to participate by the team, or who would accompany a group with whom he was already in contact (e.g. a local priest or a school-chaplain).

As Head of Religious Education at the Brothers' school in St Helens, from 1970 to 1975, I had joined with another of our schools in organising Young Christian Student (YCS) activities, which had involved a few residential visits. On certain occasions during the summer, St Cassian's had been used for these retreat-holidays, which had proved successful and popular with those taking part. I had become convinced that many sixthformers who appeared to be so bored during Religious Education lessons would be open to religious questions if these were raised in a less formal and more personal setting, such as at St Cassian's. My experience with groups at Kintbury and elsewhere led me to this conviction. I also felt that Religious Education could succeed only if it started from the doubts and questions with which the young people were filled, but which almost all were reluctant to raise and discuss in a school-setting. Surveys and informal discussions confirmed my impressions. If, as professional Christian educators, the Brothers were to respond to the needs of young people in the 1970s (a rather neglected group in the Church), while not abandoning the traditional school-setting of their apostolate, I felt they should supplement this with a retreat-centre.

The need for a residential centre with a programme specially devised for the needs of young adults and teenagers was experienced more widely than among the sixthform boys and girls of St Helens and Salford. I saw it as a general need in the British Church, and one which was being met only partially and inadequately. I was sure that, given the chance to make contact with other schools, tertiary colleges and parishes, the centre would flourish.

The experience of creative liturgy, prayer and discussion in the relaxed and friendly atmosphere of a charming old country house would provide the young participants with that for which many of them thirsted but failed to experience in the local parishes or schools: the experience of a Christian community, in which questions could be asked and experiences offered, so that faith could grow. The option, made in freedom, to help to create such a community for a few days, would offer the young people an opportunity which they would normally not have, and for which compulsory Religious Education (however well taught) and compulsory attendance at church or at religious services in school were no substitute. The full participation of teachers interested enough to accompany the group, as well as of the retreat-team, would bring the young people into personal and informal contact with adults, most of them committed to Christianity while sympathetic to the difficulties and questions of the younger generation, and not free from questions themselves. There would also be the opportunity to meet other young people, since, right from the early days, it was envisaged that, if possible, the Centre would be used by people from more than one place, coming together to form a single group, in which both sexes would be welcome.

Finally, the challenge to continue the experience (and develop its implications) beyond the few days spent in the centre would be implicit, setting up more permanent local groups to meet in liturgy and prayer as well as for social reasons - groups which would evangelize their members and the world in which they moved; a concern much discussed in the mid-seventies at various levels of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

How did this tie in with the team's commitment to fostering vocations to the Brothers' way of life? I was convinced that the work of fostering vocations to the religious life and the priesthood could not be separated from the work of building Christian communities more generally, which included praying together and sharing experiences on the level of personal faith, even if this was a searching and uncertain faith. This would often include the need to reject some "hang-ups" and misconceptions, the result of negative experiences which seemed to haunt many of the young people like ghosts, and which, if not addressed, were a major obstacle to growth into a more mature and personal faith.<sup>2</sup> If this was hard to achieve in a classroom setting, limited experience had shown how different the picture looked when seen from the setting of a residential centre, at a safe distance from home, school and parish (frequently associated with these "ghosts"). If the Brothers were to attract young men to join them, if God's call were ever to be heard as a personal call addressed in love to each one, young people must taste what a Christian community could be like and what it could mean to celebrate the Eucharist outside a formal church-setting, using music and texts to which they could respond as a group and as individuals. They must learn to relate to one another in faith and freedom, including a sharing of their questions and uncertainties. As they discovered their needs, personal ministry would be supplied by the retreat-team and by the young people themselves, since a group which contains needs also contains gifts to cater for those needs. The work was fundamentally a work of evangelization. I am writing this with the benefit of hindsight: it and its implications were to become much clearer as the team worked together during the early years, and as the numbers of young people coming to Kintbury grew considerably - into hundreds and then up to some three thousand each year, a situation which led to various changes in the facilities at St Cassian's, the structure of the programme and the size of the team.

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