



BROTHERS AT THE SERVICE OF DEAF YOUTH

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For the past 140 years, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, together with a team of lay people, have been educating children and youth with defective hearing, particularly those profoundly deaf from birth, who cannot perceive the sounds of a word. They are, in fact, «those EXCLUDED from ORAL COMMUNICATION, those EXCLUDED from modern COMMUNICATION, which is so rapidly changing. These young people cannot speak at all or they speak very poorly, but that in no way means that the auditory deficiency exists only in the «one speaking». As with all people, to be in dialogue, there are things to be said, and the vital needs of relationships.

Our objectives

In terms of ages, our pedagogical and educational work endeavours:

- to make the very smallest children become aware of a «communication relationship» and to lead them to it.
- Through sight and touch to teach them the phonemes of our language (vowels, consonants, syllables) to lead them towards words, and then phrases.
- to introduce them to «lip reading» so that they can understand the message of those who speak to them.
- to teach them the oral and written French language, mathematics, science, etc... as other children.
- To give them, eventually, schooling, a professional formation which will allow them to take their active place in society.

This absorbing and difficult work always requires the teacher or the educator to be simple and precise in the use of the means of communication, following in this the advice of John Baptist de La Salle:

«You must study to word the questions and answers... in so clear a manner that they will be easily understood». (Med. 33,3).

For a specific total formation

The main purpose which a specialized teacher should have is to lead those with hearing deficiencies towards a complete mastery of the French language, to give them a place in the world of work, and to make them share as fully as possible in the mainstream of life. Still, to over-stress this aspect of things, there is always the risk of misunderstanding the deep realities of the handicap. A famous American psychiatrist has very correctly observed that «people who can hear decide what is to be done for deaf children and adults, without taking their real conditions of life into consideration». (H. Furth).

Deaf adults themselves, after many years, try to lay claim to «their right to be different»: What deaf adults are seeking... is that you help them to be TRULY deaf adults and not a hybrid, a hearing personality grafted onto a deaf body». (R.M. Raynaud).

The judgement is severe but, nevertheless has a partial basis. For it is true that a great number of specialists work in behalf of those with hearing deficiencies: doctors, audioprothesists, orthophonists, social workers, administrators, professors, psychologists! They are all dedicated to different kinds of research, all kind of divergent initiatives which unfortunately sometimes lose sight of the fact that a young deaf person is someone to be educated as a TOTALITY. And this is not always easy to say and to live! For example, when a father or mother discover this handicap, they are traumatized and thus tend to zero in on this difference — the absence of hearing — «they deny this initial wound» (R. Diotkine). They want, at any price, that their child should speak the same as others. They forget that other ways of true communication exist:

«In giving a prime importance to the word which her child cannot hear, the mother loses the capacity of changing in another way, as she did without her own knowledge, when she spoke naturally to her child at a time when she did not know about his deafness... If this gap is prolonged, it can have serious repercussions on the communicative and linguistic abilities of the deaf child». (D. Bouvet).

This concept of totality finally implies that beside the proper techniques towards oral communication, our educational team should also allow the culture which specifically belongs to the world of the deaf to be developed and encouraged. This culture proceeds with the knowledge and mastery of «sign language», which is truly a language. This sign language allows those with defective hearing to see themselves as «different» but not «isolated». Two years ago a deaf teacher joined the teaching staff, and the proposal that there be frequent contacts between the school and associations of deaf adults seems to be a good one. Thus the young people will be able to identify themselves, and have a «model» or «reference», with someone who lives the same difficulties, the same hopes, and the same joys as themselves.

Further, the average time of studying in our school is between 10 and 14 years. For our former students, the school remains as «their home». They willingly come back there, at first to renew acquaintances, and then to exchange views with their former teachers. They reveal their concerns and seek explanations and help. The discussions are always lively. A fraternal dialogue is established between the deaf and those who can hear.

Pastoral activities

While being attentive to the total education of the deaf, we do not neglect their spiritual and religious formation. Even more than in other fields, the RELIGIOUS AWAKENING of the young requires the catechists to understand the psychology of the deaf youth very well and to perfectly master all the means of communication at their disposal. It is for this reason that the team is essentially composed of both Brothers and lay people who are «specialists».

Catechism is taught to the youngest children, with the consent of their parents. Encounters and retreats are available to the older ones. They come willingly, but the difficulties of adolescence, peer pressure, etc. make the task rather difficult. All the preparations for such encounters require a lot of time and technical means: slides and also written texts have to be projected on a screen, significant gestures have to be studied, and simplified explanations of the riches and depth of our faith have to be present above all.

Another concern with regard to the city and the region is the support and deepening of the Christian life among deaf adults. A monthly Eucharistic celebration brings together the deaf community: adults, children, parents, and friends. This celebration is prepared by a mixed team: those who are deaf and those who can hear. Once a trimester, the group meets, together with the chaplain, for a day of prayer and reflection.

Once a year, to celebrate Easter together, a great group of former students from all over France come together within the premises of the Institution. Here, about 180 to 250 people can be seen together in a warm atmosphere of faith, friendship, and solidarity, erasing the barriers of space and time.

Within this spiritual domain, we also are called upon to live the difference. Of the 114 children who frequent our center, 28 belong to the muslim religion. A professor, who himself is a muslim, helps them in prayer and during the feasts called for by the Koran. Together, and with joy the Christians and the Moslems commemorate, by a little celebration, the great liturgical moments of each religion.

Conclusion.

In the nineteenth century, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, conducted five institutions for deaf children. Today, only one remains in France. Far from lamenting past history, we continue this apostolic work which fits in so well within the frame work of John Baptist De La Salle's initiatives in favor of the poor and which responds so well to the «Declaration of the Brothers in the World Today» (34,2).

For the service to the poor cannot be separated from the poverty which is a Christian attitude of mind, the humble acceptance of the gift of Christ, the response of love for Christ, and for all men. It also requires a genuine participation in the life of the poor, and effective union with them.

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