



08-E-21

«TAKE UP YOUR PALLET AND WALK»

In the service of young wanderers

1. A Personal Odyssey

«Consider that the usual thing in the case of laborers and the poor is to leave the children free to live like vagabonds, running hither and thither, until such time as they are old enough to be applied to some trade. Such parents take no interest in sending their children to school, partly because poverty prevents them from paying teachers, and partly because they are obliged to go out to work and thus must of necessity leave the children to their own devices.

The results, however, are disastrous, for these children become accustomed to a life of idleness, and afterwards find it difficult to acquire industrious habits. Moreover, through evil associations, they learn to commit many sins from which they subsequently have great difficulty in disengaging themselves, owing to the strength of the habits whose growth has been of many years' standing.

God has been pleased to supply a remedy to so sad a condition by the establishment of Christian schools...» (Med. 194,1).

* * *

This text has been engraved in my memory since my entrance into the Brothers. It has made such an impression on me that it constitutes for me an almost continual reference. What St. John Baptist De La Salle expresses here coincides perfectly with my personal aspirations. It is more by a natural leaning than by an ideal that I have always taught the weakest students, that I have tried to be attentive to their problems, their feelings of frustration, their fears, and their aspirations and that I have tried to encourage them always. It is also by natural taste that aid to the Third World has always been one of my sidelines, without, however, having heard the call to a missionary vocation «from afar». My mission country has been my own.

At the age of 35, I wanted to perfect my education and the study of languages appealed to me. For this purpose, I enrolled in an American University. As luck would have it, at this time I was in charge of an extremely difficult class. All during the year, I accompanied my lessons with experimental psychology in my scholastic work. The result were very positive. This happening became a «SIGN» for me. I decided that I would make a study of curative pedagogy and psychology. In my Thesis at the end of my studies, which were devoted to Saint John Baptist De La Salle, I pursued two objectives: to study deeply the thoughts of our Founder on the «maladjusted child» and to do a historical study on the «reform school» at Saint Yon, a work established by the Founder. This work fascinated me and became rooted in my ideal of a BROTHER.

Having become in charge of the District of Swiss Brothers, I tried to share the best I could the thoughts which were animating me. This was a time of intense research. The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian School has always been in full evolution and in search of identity: who are the poor with whom De La Salle would be concerned today? what works would he found if he were living here today? How can the Brothers rediscover the charism of the Founder in this final part of the Twentieth Century? While this type of questioning is fruitful to give us a true prospective, it also engenders uncertainties and all kind of problems.

After my term of office ended, it was only logical that I should return to the center for the rehabilitation of drug addicts, which the Brothers of our district had founded, a few years previously, in the locality of our «Abbey of Fonatine-Andre. It was with great enthusiasm that I rejoined this work, but conscious all the while of the fact that cures for heroin addiction cannot be improvised. I applied myself the best I could... It was a very difficult apprenticeship. After a bit more than a year, I

became convinced that my place was not there, especially because I could not truly identify myself with the existing concept of the Center. Disappointed and totally uncertain about my future work, I found myself in the dark and full of qualms of conscience that I, just like three other Brothers before me, had abandoned our confrere who continued to work there alone.

* * *

I set out in search of the LIGHT. Among other things, one day I packed up my bags and went to spend a week in the mountains. I prayed quite a bit... Sometimes I bewailed my troubles as much as I articulated my hopes... I struggled with God and with myself. But, alas! the mountains did not provide me with the light I was seeking, so it was with feelings of dissatisfaction that I took the road back. (On the way, I stopped at the place of a friend of mine who was a clinical psychologist and, at great length, revealed my troubled inner feelings. It seemed to him that I was showing rather evident signs that my future was not in the Brother's vocation...) That only increased my confusion...

At the railroad station in Zurich, by chance I bought a newspaper... and suddenly I saw the light! I read a long article about a center which cares for runaway youth in this city which was founded two years before by two courageous women. Suddenly I felt a stirring within myself, within the very fibers of my being: this is the work which answers all my longing. I had very clearly determined that this work would be the ground of my future apostolate. Hardly a year later, I rejoined the Brothers community at Zurich and I began my work at Schlupfhuus. Such was my odyssey.

* * *

The Schlupfhuus (house of refuge) of Zurich was founded in 1980. In five years more than 1,300 young people passed through there. At present the animation team is made up of five women and four men. There is also a small team of voluntary helpers. The house is open 24 hours a day and is frequented by youth between the ages of 12 and 17 who have run away from home. The average age is between 14 and 16. Girls are the most numerous. Many of the teenagers, before coming to us, have spent several days in the streets and have met for the first time the hard realities of the streets in a big city. All those who come to Schlupfhuus must do so voluntarily. All they have to do is ring the bell and say that they need help in their present situation. They must authorize us to take care of them. We are able to help a number of young people to get off the streets and to find solutions for their future which will be acceptable to themselves as well as for their parents. In this sense we are preventing future trouble.

About two-thirds of the young people who come to us get back to their families the very same day or two or three days after their arrival. It stands to reason that for a short time we remain in contact with the «walk-in» cases and their families. About one-third categorically refuse to return to their family. The length of stay of our «permanent residents» varies from a week to two and a half months, even three months. On an average each night of the year we give shelter to five or six youths. In order to avoid financial complications, the first week is free. The assistants of Schlupfhuus have then a double role: that of counselors and a pedagogical function as in any other boarding school. It is the young people themselves who have to look after the kitchen and the cleanliness of the house.

In the role of counselor, our task consists in resolving the bitter crisis between the teenager and his parents. The first objective which we pursue is always the reintegration of the young person into his family. In those cases where such proves to be impossible, it is necessary, with all those concerned, to find another suitable alternative. We could also add that the Center has an SOS telephone. Many young boys and girls make use of this for making their first contact with us; some distressed parents also call us... Schlupfhuus is a private institution which is subsidized in the amount of 60% by the government.

Bro. Othmar WURTH