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BROTHER SCUBILION (3) Catechist of Slaves: A Gospel of Freedom.

In the previous article in the *Lasalliana*, we introduced you to the Missionary, «the Brother called to those afar»: far from the big city, far from salvation. In Brother Scubilion we have found a precocious and authentic apostolic vocation, a true passion to evangelize, which burned throughout his entire life. He had been a missionary at Bourbon, La Reunion, with his Brothers, and as his Brothers, he shared their modest task as teachers and catechists. But he went further than they in the gift of himself, tormented by the desire to always do more good, which was a bit difficult to do within the framework of the school which completely ignored the world of the slaves who, we should not forget, made up half the population of the island.

So what did he do? Without any special mission, but by a true instinct for evangelization, he gave himself to the disinherited, he went to become their indefatigable catechist, also to teach them the rudiments of education. Such catechetical and elementary instruction was forbidden for slaves at that time in 1843 when he arrived in Saint-Leu, which was located in the West and which had the richest coffee and sugar cane plantations on the island, and therefore, had the biggest number of slaves. From the depths of his vocation as a Missionary Brother was born his true vocation: Catechist of the Slaves. This in the future would be his name, his identification; in due time it will become his veritable title of glory. But to understand the difficulty of his task, the obstacles and efforts to vanquish him, and to judge the merits of his apostolic work, we must study the true situation.

Slavery? Much has been written about this sin of «Christian» nations from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the ignoble but lucrative traffic in «ebony timber» (the black slave trade) practiced on a grand scale on slave ships, to furnish cheap manual labor for the colonies and for the cotton, sugarcane, and coffee plantations of Louisiana, the Antilles, La Reunion, and other places. That Islam preceded the Christian nations in the slavery is a historical fact but not an excuse. People can go out of their way to justify the unjustifiable even by theological reasoning, but, behind all the beautiful rhetoric, we always find the profit angle. People have tried to legalize slavery, to define the slaves' rights under the law to avoid excesses, but perhaps all they were doing was legalizing barbarism. Once the slaves arrived at their destination, they were sold like cattle, they became mere chattel of their masters, without any real rights, simply tools of labor. On the Island of La Reunion, the masters were Christians, yet they tolerated religious instruction only after working hours, that is after a burdensome day... but only if you could find some catechist who would be interested in teaching them!

Brother Scubilion was one of those. He had lived through the time of slavery. He had lived during the transition period, which was inevitable, especially around 1840, from slavery to emancipation. This emancipation, which for a long time was restrained by vested interests, finally became a reality in 1848. The courageous and persevering anti-slavery politicians (Victor Schoelcher, among them) had forced the decision; the strong influence of the Church and her missionaries assured the non-violent passage from slavery to freedom.

Among these missionaries, the Brothers, as a rule, played a more discrete role in their schools: the primary instruction of the children of settlers or free creoles. Brother Scubilion had, of course, in his little class, to rigorously steer clear of this movement and to follow the traditions of his institute. Yet it was at this time that he was going to, we might say, «invent» together with God his specific vocation. Without being disobedient, he was going to be daring. What he was going to undertake was not a chance happening, nor a passing fancy, nor a desire to be different but it was rather to be a profound faithfulness to the intuition of his Founder. In effect, he was not going to «invent» catechism for the Blacks, for Father Alexander Monet had already been the pioneer in this domain since 1840. Rather, Brother Scubilion was going to start night classes to catechize the slaves in the school itself, beginning in 1843 at Saint Leu. Without doubt he would continue to teach the lower class. But he would add to this, catechism classes for the slaves. How does one explain this change, this conversion to the Blacks? It is very simple, now that we know a little bit about Brother Scubilion. Instinctively, he had a great love for the most abandoned: his zeal, his secret longing, his quest was to enlarge the horizons of his ministry. He did not have to go very far to search for this. Numerous slaves populated the rich plantations and, we might add, made them profitable. The truly poor were not too far away: they were at the doors of the school without having an access to the school. This was no time and place for a directly evangelical type of action: go toward these outcasts. I deliberately say «go toward...» because the planters and their slave bosses, and supervisors would not look very kindly upon having their manual laborers leaving their place of work to attend catechism lessons which would lead to who-knows-what? Perhaps, in the long run this could be truly dangerous for these slaves to become conscious of a certain dignity, that of being sons of God, and to inhale a few breaths of the air of freedom.

So there we have Brother Scubilion, leaving his school, which was not very readily seen among the Brothers, to

go to visit the rich colonists, to talk with them, to exhort them in the name of the Gospel and request of them a few hours of free time for their slaves. Elementary classes during the day and catechism classes for the Blacks in the evening (which would be unthinkable during working hours). There we have, to use the words of Monsignor Aubry, Bishop of Reunion, the completely devoured «Slave of the Slaves». Thus, little by little, like Saint John Baptist De La Salle, he allowed himself to be led by God, event after event, until he was totally absorbed in the service of the Blacks. For him, it was not enough just to be inclined towards the slaves, but more effectively he had to do much more: in a sense to participate in the innermost part of their distress, not as a mere pretence, but in true imitation of Christ who «took upon himself the condition of a slave». Scubilion was assimilated into them: he the free slave of Christ, taught them that they were all freemen in the Lord. This was a marvelous transformation of roles already formulated by Saint Paul: «A slave who has been called by the Lord is the Lord's free man: in the same way a free man who has been called by Christ is his slave». (I Cor. VII, 22).

To catechize the slaves was perhaps the best way of preparing them for their liberation without knowing that the time of their emancipation was now very near. It would be at Saint-Leu that he would be living with the slaves and their children on December 20, 1848, the day of the abolition of slavery. And when, in 1850, he would leave Saint-Leu for La Possession, he would find a number of freed slaves whom he would make into ardent catechists: they would be exclusively catechists to their own people, this is the epitome of the missionary vocation. For the other Brothers there were day classes; for him there were evening classes for the newly-free. This happy division of labor was not a personal whim but was a work sanctioned by his Superior, Brother John of Matha, who recognized in Brother Scubilion an evident charism for the religious education of the former slaves. This was the apostolate to which the indefatigable catechist would concentrate his maximum effectiveness. He did not allow himself any other respite or break other than to multiply elementary classes and religious instruction for the slaves. It was probably more difficult now teaching the new catechetical pupils and more difficult to assemble them than it was during their time of slavery. Now they were far from the plantations, so replete with bad memories for them. The greater majority of them were now scattered in the Highlands of the Island. He had to go looking for them, and once having found them, he had to intreat them, convince them, and finally to lead them to the evening catechism classes, during the week, and to those given on Sunday before divine office time. These were the «Apostolic excursions» of Brother Scubilion.

What should we say about the Catechesis of Brother Scubilion? Their content interests us the least. The subject matter is more or less fixed. It is the style, the manner, the art of the catechist that make the big difference. He knew marvelously well how to adapt his lessons to these simple, totally illiterate people. He knew how to teach the slaves, and later the free people, the great truths of salvation, the commandments, the Sacraments which they were called upon to receive, and the Christian prayers which were to be recited each day. Brother Scubilion made all of these ingeniously inventive. His catechism classes were lively, with dialogue, a round of questions and answers, sometimes alternated between choirs, and topped off by a refrain given by the entire class. Besides the words there was the chant: The Creed was engrained in their memories because of the natural rhythm which the Blacks have in their blood.¹ But let us listen to Brother Scubilion himself talk about his lessons in catechism:

«Yes, I was the happiest with those good former slaves, and when I was seated among them it was a place better than to be seated on the throne of the greatest monarch in the world; they listened to me speak of God as if they were listening to God Himself, speaking through my mouth. These poor unfortunate ones took great pains to learn the main truths of our holy religion. They would say to me in their own language: «I understand what you are saying to me. You tell me that there is only one God. He made me to love Him and to enter into His paradise...».

For the Saint's catechism lessons, before the Sunday office, there were sometimes as many as three hundred Freedmen who gathered around him. Then, during the first pastoral visit of Msgr. Desprez to La Possession, in 1854, «His Excellency was amazed by the success obtained by Brother Scubilion in the teaching of catechism. More than six hundred Blacks were chanting in chorus and in a most admirable manner the principal truths of our religion». And the witness continues: «His Excellency cited this as the most moving episode in his pastoral tour. Long after that he talked about it and was always pleased to hear some news about Brother Scubilion». ²

Let us say again, that even at Sainte-Marie, during the last eleven years of his life in «active retirement», he remained the catechist of the poor up to the very end. In the territory belonging to the parish there were still a number of people who had not been evangelized. There were many among the emancipated slaves who were more or less ashamed or recalcitrant, or who just neglected being instructed and baptized, and there were others who were «hired help» who came from India, Africa, or Madagascar to work on the plantations or in the sugar mills. They were free in principle, and by law, but how unprovided for they were! Once again Brother Scubilion would travel around the countryside, visiting the sugar centrals, searching out the poor, convincing them and leading them to his night catechism classes, preparing them for baptism, and later for a Christian marriage, and for many it was only after many years of delay.

I shall finish this very long testimony about Brother Scubilion, the catechist of the slaves and emancipated, with the account given by a young Brother of 22 years who met the «old Brother» for the first time in 1865: «Brother Scubilion, I might say, took possession of me, and inspired me to devote myself to the glory of God. When I told him that I was teaching catechism to the Blacks, his already smiling face became radiant. Then he explained to me his method of teaching catechism. Then he taught me how to sing the Commandments of God and taught me the melodies of two or three religious songs which he either gave me or had me copy».

The poor people whom Brother Scubilion evangelized must have had good memories. Perhaps that is what explains why even until this day, he is still venerated by the people in La Reunion.

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¹ For more details about the catechism lessons of Brother Scubilion, see pages 122 to 131 of my book, *Brother Scubilion*, Jean-Bernard Rousseau (Editions Declée de Brouwer).

² Brother Gonzalvien, Visitor of Madagascar-La Reunion, in his «Biographical Notes» in 1899.