

THE LASALLIAN YOUTH CENTER: Gallipoli

Foundation and purpose

In the past few years, a series of unfavorable conditions led the Roman Province of the Brothers of the Christian Schools to close some institutions which were operating in Southern Italy: Benevento, Torre del Greco, and Salerno. As a consequence of this, the Provincial Chapter of 1981 decided upon the orientation of creating something which would substitute, at least in part, for the previous presence.

The introduction of summer camps into the vocational program suggested a different way by means of which the Brothers could come into contact with the youth in our institutions in a way beyond the class room contact and in a more diversified way. Such a novel method brought to maturity the conviction of the possibility of a work which, without having the school as its primary scope, could open itself to youth by offering opportunities for contact and education different from the traditional kind.

Upon the fertile soil of such availability fell the seed of Divine Providence. At Gallipoli, in the province of Lecce, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd were no longer able to maintain one of their works because of the lack of personnel. Wishing to preserve, in keeping with the wishes of the Bishop, a Christian presence, they turned to various religious congregations hoping that one of them would be interested. The offer which was sent to the General House of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, was forwarded to the Rome Province. This request was given serious consideration by the Brother Provincial and his council, and after careful study, an affirmative decision was reached.

On September 18, 1984 the doors of the LASALLIAN YOUTH CENTER "Villa Rosa Virginia" were opened.

The Community is made up of three Brothers.

The scope of the institution is to offer a place for getting together for the youth and children of the city; a place where they can meet and make friends with one another; a place where, as they while away their free time, they can grow physically and intellectually, but above all, morally and spiritually. Hence, the Community is open to any type of recreational, athletic, cultural, or religious activity.

It was not difficult to start. It was enough just to open the doors, prepare the athletic field, set up some meeting rooms, and above all to show our availability to dialogue and to "waste time the boys".

No official invitation was necessary; in fact, there was no advertisement or notice at all. The boys and girls just came spontaneously, calling their friends in turn. Now, that we are in the second year of operation, the LASALLIAN YOUTH CENTER is frequented by more than three hundred boys who find herein an outlet for their physical exuberance, their need for friendship and appreciation and for their thirst for a consoling word in their sorrow, insecurity, or confusion, just a little bit of help along life's difficult path.

For a sizable group of children and youth, the Center has become a kind of second home, where you cannot help but go everyday, a door to be looked upon longingly should it be closed.

Activities which have developed

We are convinced, first of all, that the main activity and the most efficacious instrument are our being kind and understanding, our being available for whatever kind of intervention or help: simply being together, helping them in their studies, and counselling and giving them educational guidance.

In particular we offer:

a) In the field of religious formation.

— Every Saturday there is a course in catechesis for all the children divided into three groups according to age. This is followed by a half hour of singing in preparation for the Sunday liturgy.

— Every Sunday the Holy Mass is celebrated, festively enlivened by the boys.

— The liturgical seasons are strictly observed with prayer encounters and special celebrations.

— The observance of Holy Week is notable with a well attended and well prepared celebration and with the organization of a spiritual day of retreat.

— One Brother prepares a group of children for First Holy Communion.

b) In the area of sports and recreation.

— Introductory courses are organized for playing and for tournaments in football, volleyball, basketball, track and field, etc. We take advantage of every opportunity to offer our youths time for relaxing and for enjoyable games.

c) *In the area of Culture.*

— The boys can come to us to do their homework assignments and can avail of our help in our fields of competence and they can use the library, which is at their disposal.

— At Christmas time and during the Carnival we have had very successful performances.

d) *Activities outside of the institute.*

— By the invitation of the Bishop of Gallipoli, two Brothers teach religion in the State secondary school to children between 11 and 14 years of age. In their twenty classes, they teach more than 500 students. Their teaching is very much appreciated by the students, their families, and by the school.

— Whether as a community of Brothers, or as a Youth Center, we strive to be present and involved in various civic organizations and we contribute toward the organization and accomplishment of various presentations.

Entrance to the Lasallian Youth Center and participation in the various activities is open and absolutely free of charge. Its facilities are offered to the youth of the city without any distinction. However, this does not preclude having the boys regularly sign up for the various activities to guarantee the seriousness and the accuracy of their involvement.

Evaluation and prospective

The journey through the first year of activities naturally registered the type of difficulties characteristic of new operations, and especially because it was a type of work completely different from that usually done by the Brothers of the province. Things progressed with trial and experimentation, attention being paid to the fact that the activities should be enjoyable to the boys and girls and should offer them opportunities for growth. The Brothers were always available to increase or to substitute the activity offered depending on whether or not it responded to the needs of the young. It is thus that we proceeded gradually in the organization of sports, of periods of instruction, and then more varied activities. The children and youth were given the widest latitude in participating in the various activities proposed and the great variety of activities they belonged to could be noted; from the curious visitors to those who occasionally participated in something; from those who regularly frequented a course to those who were habitually found to be open to any kind of suggestion. Among these last mentioned, it was laudable and encouraging to see a group of bigger boys who not only took part in everything but who also actively cooperated with the Brothers in making things easier and in bringing about an increase of initiatives. To these youths we express our approval, gratitude, and best wishes; together may we follow a path which will help each one to grow and mature and to express, with the help of the Lord, what is best in each person.

Our obligation for the immediate future is to make sure that those things which were born, perhaps too hastily, can now be consolidated. Now that the euphoria of the beginnings have passed, the necessary consistent measures must be taken to guarantee their permanence.

There are some parents of our children who help us so much by their availability and their enthusiasm, but in general, so far there exists only a limited dialogue with the majority of them. We propose, as the opportunities present themselves, to find together with them the best means of knowledge and cooperation for initiating enterprises which could be beneficial even to the parents themselves.

We truly wish that our Center will become the center of true and meaningful life where the needs, preoccupations and joys of this part of the city find an adequate resonance, and within the necessary limits, prospective solution and direction.

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