

## LASALLIAN ASSOCIATIONS IN AFRICA

During the months of November and December, 1985, I made a trip through the French-speaking countries of Africa. I visited some of the works of the Brothers in seven countries: Burkina Faso, Togo, Cameroon, Zaire, Rwanda, Madagascar, and Egypt. As you can imagine, I returned with my soul filled with memories, experiences, hope, and gratitude. I discovered things which left me astounded and filled me with respect. I should like to share with the *Lasalliana* readers some of my experiences because I feel that everyone will find satisfaction in finding out about Lasallians far beyond.

### **Purpose of the trip**

I am the Brother Moderator of the Lasallian Associations and a bit of an "animator" of the Signum Fidei spiritual movement. For both of these, it seemed that it was opportune to make contact with the various African Districts in order, on my part, to clearly explain to the Brothers the scope and the evolution of the Associations and the meaning of Signum Fidei. Also, I wanted to offer to our secular Lasallian friends the possibility of being integrated into these Lasallian movements, in case they have not already been so, in keeping with the changes and progress in the spirit which has taken hold recently within the Lasallian family.

### **Common characteristics**

So that I do not repeat myself in some important things, I want to cite a few of them which were the leit motif in all these countries:

— The Brothers, and especially the Visitors, everywhere, received me fraternally: they always made me feel that I was among Brothers. But, I was among, let us say, "special" Brothers who give their life's strength, living at times in very difficult and poor circumstances, even the most poor. The Brothers went out of their way to help me. The local Brothers are not only our hope but are La Salle Brothers of the highest calibre.

The Lasallian lay people paid close attention and showed extraordinary interest in my "message".

— In each District, arrangements were made for me to meet with numerous secular organizations.

— With these groups I had meetings, friendly, leisurely chats, about La Salle today.

— The immediate result everywhere was full acceptance, far surpassing my fullest expectations.

— I believe that in each case, I left with a new understanding of the local Association.

— I think that I have left the basis which, with time and goodwill, will lead to the founding of a national federation.

— The Signum Fidei has been for many a pleasant surprise and the seed of this organization has been well sown.

### **Other kinds of Characteristics**

The work of these districts shows an extraordinary vision of the future, and at the same time, and in the founders, there exists a total confidence in the result of a quality Christian and human education.

— Many of the buildings which were constructed from the very beginning of the Brothers' activities are very astounding. They are big, well laid out, quite functional, and architecturally aesthetic. It is evident that the districts of origin gave themselves heart and soul to their missionary work, and it is equally evident that the local Brothers, lacking the personnel of former times, use their innovative genius to carry on these same activities with many students and with the cooperation of lay teachers who work together with a notable Lasallian spirit.

— The "inculturation" of our communities in these countries is evident.

— Equally evident is that our schools are packed with a multitude of students who are hungering for education and learning. They are full of life and joy, very versatile and curious about the young people in the old world.

— Still more outstanding is the desire to be joined in La Salle with so many friends from other places and together to seek the realization of what De La Salle had envisioned in this world.

— Finally, what was very striking was the identity of the Lasallian spirit which I was able to appreciate in the Houses of Formation: postulants, novices, and scholastics. It was great to see the fascination of these young religious who are thinking of dedicating their life to the same ideal to which I, myself, and so many other Brothers have dedicated ours. This was a source of joy and hope. It is no wonder that Africa is called "the Continent of Hope".

**BURKINA FASO** — (Upper Volta) — I visited Ouagadougou, Bobo-Dioulasso, Tunuma, and Tusiana.

Everywhere it was a delight to see the afternoon dismissal from class. And you think about how, thanks to the Brothers, these countries are made up of well-prepared and responsible citizens. Thanks to the Church, they are good Christians. In Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso, after dismissal, another wave, this time adults, enter the same classrooms to learn how to read and write. It is the students from the final year themselves who help their fellow countrymen to rise from their illiteracy. Admirable! I met a multitude of them in Tounouma, a smaller group in Ouagadougou, and I talked to the boarding students in Toussiana. This is beautiful work because all of these students are admitted free. Brother Dominique, Visitor, promised his assistance.

**TOGO** — I visited Lomé and Togoville

In Lomé, I had a meeting with the National Lasallian Directory, who were well disposed and attentive. In Togoville, there is another great spectacle of a new large school for young people, right along side the common people who are still guided by mysterious ancestral tribal rituals. What a contrast! Here, the Spanish Brothers are carrying on some extraordinary work. I spoke with a young promising group, had a dialogue with the Postulants in Lomé and spoke with various classes of students in St. Joseph's.

**CAMEROON** — I visited Yaoundé, Duala, Mbanga, Bafang, Efofok. The Brother Visitor was my guide.

I had many meetings in Yaoundé, Mbanga and Bafang which were outstanding. Still, one of the best of these was in Duala where I was told that more than 300 Lasallian youths already have a meaningful association. I saw various groups of the Signum Fidei and Lasallian Cameroonian Youth. This was a very fruitful as well as enjoyable encounter. Apart from this, De La Salle College of Douala, for example, is very impressive in every way: its shops for trades are first class as are its classrooms, campus, building, and its room with 20 computers, which the young students operate so very well. "Cameroon would not be what it is without the Brothers," Brother Pouliot, Visitor remarked. In Efofok, the Brothers offer help to the farmers in the region. I spoke with the postulants and scholastics. I met with another Group of well disposed Lasallian Youths and with another fervent Signum Fidei Group.

**ZAIRE** — I was in Kinshasa, Tumba, Boma, Matadi, Mbanza...

All these names are very important in the history of the Brothers in Zaire. The Lasallians there impressed us with their great openness to, interest in, the "new" Association, which is less new for them because two of their friends who had attended the meeting in Mexico brought news back. Many alumni hold important government posts and among them is the Prime Minister, who received us graciously. Also, the Bishop of Boma, who invited us for dinner, offered words of welcome and sent his regards to the Brothers who had forged the great center at Boma and he expressed his desire that the Brothers return there. There was a visit to the center with Brother Visitor, who promised this return of the Brothers. There were meetings with Lasallians in Boma, with an encouraging group in Kinshasa, Matadi and Tumba. All these places have good buildings filled with students. I had the pleasure of talking to the French-speaking novices and postulants of Africa who are in Kinshasa. It is a good and promising group. I spoke to them about our mission. A thing of great interest was the Museum of Zairean Modern Art which is under the care of Brother Michel and the Ancient Art, under the care of Brother Cornet, National Director of Museums. I am grateful to Brother Visitor who prepared my work schedule and acted as my guide.

Here is another interesting detail. I had brought with me from Rome some copies of the Draft of the Rule for the Brothers to discuss prior to the General Chapter. The communities in Zaire had not received the copies sent to them by mail. However, one former Brother came to the Provincialate to give the Brothers a copy which he had found and purchased at the public market!

**RWANDA** — I visited Byumba, Butaré, and Kigali.

Byumba is a big boarding school for poor boys and is well taken care of by an excellent community and outstanding faculty. I had a long conversation with the former students, with the "Lasallian Family" and with many students. In Butaré I met with the Rwandan Federation Directory with whom I had a long dialogue. Brother Visitor accompanied me and promised to help form a national Federation. Brother Willy Joegens will help also from Butaré itself. I took the opportunity to speak with the Brothers Scholastics who are studying in this university city. There are about ten of them and they are very promising. Kisoro is an agricultural school. Rwanda is a country of a thousand hills. When it rains, soil erosion causes quite a bit of damage. The water saturates the ground and ends by eroding it. The Brothers direct the Agricultural School and teach the boys how to convert the hillside into terraces. There are two planting sessions and two harvests each year. The young students learn how to select seeds, raise animals, make flour, sausages, bread, etc..

**MADAGASCAR** — I visited Tananarivo, Tamatava, Ambositra, Analabe, Soavimbaoaka, and Moramanga.

In the absence of the Brother Visitor, the National Moderator of the Lasallian Association, Brother Edmon, was my mentor and excellent guide. We visited Tanarive where the schools of St. Joseph, the oldest of the Brothers' schools and Holy Family school are located. Here I was overwhelmed by the warm reception which I received. The house of formation in Soavimbaoaka contains aspirants who are now my friends and Brothers who refuse to retire. In Tamatava I set a new record for meetings, having given six hours of talks in one day in the three magnificent Lasallian schools which have more than 3,00 pupils. It also has a "Lasallian Family", three sections of graduating students with more than 60 students in each section. We visited the provincial Governor who expressed his admiration for the education in La Salle. Here the pupils sang "Honneur à Toi" very enthusiastically even though they did not understand the meaning of the song.

Analabe is the place of the Novitiate where a dozen Novices offered an emotional and unique liturgy. In Ambositra we visited with some forty teachers connected with the school of Saint Louis. We met for another two hours with the Lasallian Family, presided over by General Councilor Brother Vincent Rabemahafaly, and the meeting was impressive by the quantity and quality of his help. In Madagascar there were three Signum Fidei groups, headed by Brother Marcellin. Together with him, we prayed and reflected and encouraged one another to continue in our fervor. In Moramanga I spoke with students, alumni, and teachers in St. John of Matha College. The Sunday Mass and the meeting and prayer with the La Sallian family were memorable.

**EGYPT** — I visited Cairo (Daher) Khoronfish, Alexandria, and the Regional Novitiate.

Also here, the Daher community received me fraternally, the head of the Region, Brother Regis prepared contacts for me, and Brother Raymond Berzi took me to the various meetings. The Association of Daher in full session took part in my presentation of the Lasallian Association. The chapter is young and well oriented. In Alexandria, in the famous St. Mark's College, the Association explained its activities, among which is blood donating, which is very difficult in the muslim atmosphere. There I saw their social hall, full of young people. We had a meeting about the new Association and the idea was received without reserve. I visited the Regional Novitiate for the Near East and met there with four Lebanese novices and one Egyptian who show high hopes for the future. I had a meeting with some young people which was called, "Youth-Brothers" with Brother Yves in charge. This meeting left me very impressed. They spoke of the Brothers' vocation as a blessing for Egypt. In Egypt they prepared for me a visit to the sounds and sights of the pyramids. It was magnificent!

**CONCLUSION** — In Africa I found the loyalty to the Brothers, devotion to the Holy Founder, and the acceptance of the "New Association" on the same high level as in Europe. We met alumni everywhere, even at the airport where they facilitated certain formalities.

- I sincerely wish that I have left as good memories as those which I have taken with me.
- My purpose was to awaken an understanding of the Association and I believe that I have succeeded.
- I wish to express my astonishment at the work being done by the Brothers who are giving their health and life to present the Christian and Lasallian message in such exemplary and fabulous schools.
- I must express my gratitude for the overwhelming hospitality I received everywhere and in return I affirm my respect and admiration for the richness and generosity of the African spirit.

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