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## **ACCEPTANCE, HELP, PRAYER: A COMMUNITY AT THE SERVICE OF YOUTH**

In the religious life it can happen that obedience coincides with the deep aspirations of a Brother. I actually had the opportunity of experiencing such a situation when the Brother Visitor assigned me to a new community created in the heart of Lyon, on the border of neighborhood with a large immigrant population.

### **The origins of the community**

The community was started by the Brother Visitor and his council in response to a directive of the District Chapter of 1982, in joining two initiatives into one perspective where the spirit of FAITH and the spirit of ZEAL overlap:

- ★ an initiative of FAITH, in receiving large groups of young people between 17 and 25 years of age, and giving them spiritual encounters from time to time and weekly periods of prayer, but putting this work into practice requires constant ZEAL;

- ★ an initiative of ZEAL at the service of less-favoured youth and notably teenaged immigrants, but this zeal, in its turn, presupposes a solid FAITH, to advance against all hope.

It is ardently wished that these young men for whom this double initiative is intended could associate with the Brothers and live in community and become their "observers"; likewise that the young girls could enter into relations with such or such a congregation of women.

But we have not gotten that far yet!

### **The community**

At first, four Brothers were assigned by Brother Visitor and they were gathered together with a community plan which was just summarized in the preceding paragraph. Although there was a consensus at first, we must recognize that two of the Brothers have their principal activities outside of the quarter. And then when, at the beginning of the first year, there was a partial change in the community, still there were only two Brothers at the service of the Maghrébin immigrants. But, on the contrary, the entire community gathers together to receive the students or young workers who come to pray with us.

As far as creature comforts are concerned, the community lives rather simply. We do our own cooking, cleaning, and maintenance. We are living, under a precarious lease, in an old building scheduled for demolition. Our relations with the other tenants in the apartment are cordial. They are so much so that the majority of the tenants, representing five nationalities, came to our modest New Year's reception.

Despite the difficulties in scheduling, arising from the variety of our commitments, we try to find time for prayers together, office, mental prayer, as well as for a weekly community meeting. Taken up by so many activities, we hardly have time to watch television!

### **Receiving more mature youth**

We should say a few words about our weekly prayer meetings in which an average of twelve to fifteen young people take part, even though this is not the purpose of the present paper. Actually, the two initiatives of the community are inseparable, as we have underlined above; and the attention given to the students supports our activities in favour of the least privileged adolescents, as will be explained later on. And what is more, playing host to these youths allows the entire community to share in the same activity.

To get these meetings going, we took advantage of the great fortune of being able to tie in closely with some forty young students in Lyon even before the establishment of the new community. These youths whom we knew, generally former students of the Brothers, had already taken part in weekend recollections — which continue to be held about twice each school trimester — so it is quite natural that certain ones among them should get into the habit of meeting together each week to pray with us.

### **The Immigrants' Quarter**

As a result of various circumstances, and notably because of the failure of the local government to make any provisions, a veritable ghetto has sprung up in the very heart of Lyon. The workers are packed into this quarter, which has never been maintained, and to make matters worse, in the course of the past ten years, entire families have come to join their fathers who were working alone in France. The packing has reached an unbelievable density: for example, a family of six or eight persons can be found occupying a small apartment of twenty square meters!

Ever since this populace has been afflicted by unemployment, crimes of all sorts have grown up and delinquencies have spread among the 20 to 25 year-olds who are so often unemployed and without hope.

### **Our entrance into the quarter**

It was not very simple to effectively set our selves up near such a locality. We were able to do so because we met at the very beginning a number of people who accepted us and set us on the right track. On our part, that demanded of us some initiatives and contacts made with great simplicity in favour of peo-

ple at all levels, with the Christians as well as with the non-Christians: priests, social workers, nurses, public school teachers, association heads, etc. On the part of all these people, there was a quality of remarkable acceptance: they inspired us with confidence.

### **Youth Problems**

We have mentioned above how the reuniting of families in the past few years has attracted to Lyon women, children, and teenagers, certain of whom have grown up. A serious examination of the situation pointed out the need for a number of activities in favour of these people, which we have carried out over the past dozen years. By contrast, there exist very few initiatives designed to help the older youths. Therefore, we Brothers let it be known that we will willingly be available to work for the good of youth.

And so, two months after our arrival, Brother Gerard Coudoir, the former director of a technical school for the poor, was asked to work as a voluntary monitor in one of the "quarter's shops". This shop, set up by a local group, provides young boys between twelve and sixteen years of age with some activities after school. The role of Brother Gerard is in the carpentry section. He guides the young men in their various work which they have undertaken to fabricate certain articles which they want.

In my regard, I had to wait a much longer time: I had to wait for seven months after we got ourselves established before I received a definite request to help in the scholastic training of some immigrant adolescents. The request came from the "Association of Immigrant Families" of the quarter. The beginnings were quite modest with four to ten pupils entering in January and June, 1985. We had no place for our classes. We had to depend upon the good will of the association itself which itself was very deprived of means and we had to suffer from the cold during the severe months of January of 1985! We went through some difficult times until September of 1985 when the situation was remedied thanks to the kind intervention of the president of the General Council who put an unused place at our disposal and thanks to the District which assumed the costs of repairing the place.

### **Educational support for youth**

Since the month of October 1985, there have been plenty of young people. They have been directed to our place by the Social Assistants as well as by the moderators of associations. At present we know about forty youths between 12 and 17 years of age, half of whom come to us regularly, that is, two or three times a week. The help which we give them is usually individual, but sometimes we take them two or three at a time if they belong to the same class.

We have to recruit monitors. We seek out students

for this and quite naturally we do so among those whom we already know. Thus, it is in this area where much interaction is found between the two initiatives of our community plan. Right now, there are eight student volunteers who devote an average of two hours per week helping in school. We also are benefitting by the services of a young girl who has finished her higher studies and whom we have assigned to help within the framework of "Work for Mutual Help".

We have set up a formal association. Our costs are minimal but, all the same, there are a lot of expenses, especially for heating. At present those helping us the most financially are the former students of La Salle, Lyon.

Our relationships with these young people are very close. Without seeking them out particularly, they come to us with their problems, not only scholastic ones, but also, for example, their concerns about their living accommodations or work for their families. It sometimes happens that we speak about God during the course of the explanation of the lessons. The student monitors also have excellent relations with their pupils and often enough we exchange ideas on their volunteer work as well as on their progress in their own studies. All of this is quite enriching for a Brother.

### **Relations with the families**

The families appreciate very much having someone concerned about their children and having someone help them in their studies. This brings about an easy access to the adults. They do not hesitate to ask for help, for example to help a single person move. It is likewise because of this simplicity and openness that they have asked me to become the treasurer of the "Association of Immigrant Families" of the quarter, which entails a certain number of duties and initiatives far surpassing the simple keeping of accounts.

### **By way of conclusion**

I shall limit myself to a few remarks:

★ Having been away from teaching for some years now, I should like to express, first of all, my joy in having students, and pleasant students at that.

★ For the first time in a long time, I know that my work will not bring in any income for anyone (neither for the community nor for me): so I feel that I am therefore "a Brother maintaining a school gratuitously". That is possible because, having reached the age of retirement, I receive the corresponding pension.

★ The greatest joy that I experience in this work is that I find myself engaged in a truly Lasallian work, because I am at the service of the poor.

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