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ANIMATION OF GROUPS OF MOTHER CATECHISTS

In the two Districts of Mexico, the parents of the students have been invited to participate in the teaching of religion in the schools. According to the schools, this invitation has received a greater or lesser response. The reasons are varied and the present situation is susceptible to evolution. In general, however, it is above all the mothers of the family who agree to participate in the catechism effort.

In the District of South Mexico, three Brothers work full-time in the Pastoral Commission which takes charge of guiding and supervising the catechetical programs and at the same time looking after the vocational program, both for youth and for adults. In order to learn more about the animation of the groups of "Mother Catechists", we asked some questions of Brother Carlos Alveano, who is in charge of this Commission.

1) What concretely does this responsibility entail?

For the schools in the urbanised centres of Mexico City, there is generally a group of 6 or 7 persons who accept the responsibility of education in the faith in the primary schools. These are the groups I work with directly.

In the schools outside of the Federal District, groups of Mother Catechists. The importance of these groups may vary from a few individuals up to some forty persons.

It is always a question of volunteers, which explains, no doubt, the variations of numbers. Usually, it is the Brothers who, in each school, seek out the volunteers. Further, it frequently happens that the Mother Catechists themselves invite other parents of students to join them.

2) But does not such participation in catechesis require previous training?

Definitely. Among those who accept the responsibility in Mexico City, for example, many have followed courses in catechesis and in theology at La Salle University, which they had chosen as their electives.

For the others, we give them on-the-spot training. These sessions or series of courses are given to them especially at the beginning of the school year but they also continue on throughout the school year, in the form of bi-weekly courses.

3) What is your role in this training?

For the urbanised centres of Mexico, in which half of our schools are concentrated, I have established an annual calendar of meetings: once a month I meet with those who are in charge of each group. Beginning with a proposed working plan, these meetings are the occasion of training. Questions are answered, practical advice is exchanged, and these belong to the psychological, pedagogical, or doctrinal order: on the manner of proceeding with the children. Further, I regularly visit those in charge of catechism, in their own schools during their actual work.

For the groups in the provincial schools, I also have an annual calendar of visits and meetings.

4) How do you organise the catechetical work in these schools?

In each school there is at least one Brother in charge of working together with the group of catechists.

Each week, a meeting is called for the concrete purpose of preparing lessons. These meetings sometimes also entail courses in Bible training, as part of the overall program.

During the catechism sessions, the groups are broken down into small teams of two or three persons. It is those who are the most experienced who take charge of the pupils and assume the essential part of the work. The others are trained by this contact and little by little acquire experience and confidence in themselves.

Each catechist works in only one class and chooses, whenever possible, the level and age which suits her best.

5) There is, then, a definite programme?

Yes, five years ago, one Brother of the District drew up a program divided into the six years of the primary school. This program has been perfected with the collaboration of the catechists themselves. It has even given birth to six text books used in the schools of the District. In fact, for each level there are two texts;

the teacher's manual and the exercise book of the pupils.

Recently, four of these books were revised. These programmes revolve around Christology and the Sacraments, starting off with the Bible and according to a division of Liturgical themes. Added to this is the Marian dimension, so dear to Mexicans.

We must remark, however, that preparation for First Holy Communion and for Confirmation are treated separately, in a more intensive way, during the two month period directly preceding the reception of these two sacraments. Involved here are also the parents and godparents concerned. This preparation is done mostly after school hours, in the early evening, and is culminated by a retreat.

6) Could we have a more precise picture of this program?

In the first year, we offer 35 themes broken down into three parts: God is my Father; Jesus leads me to the Father; We are saved together with Jesus.

The second year is centered on the following perspective: God is among us, we celebrate this and meet Him in the Eucharist.

The third year stresses the life of Jesus so as to derive from it lessons for our own lives.

In general, we try to show that Jesus of the Gospels is present to us today, that his appeals concern us and that they invite us to reflect on our own personal conduct. This format is presented and lived according to the liturgical seasons.

7) Do you have a different program beyond the primary school?

Yes. In the secondary classes, the catechesis is organized differently. There are Brothers and certain lay teachers who take charge of religious instruction. The mothers no longer participate here. However, some of them would like to continue on into the secondary school and this, no doubt, will be implemented in the future, as is the case in some schools of the North Mexico District.

We also see that certain mothers continue to participate in the catechetical program even after their children have finished the primary school. They have discovered a certain vocation as catechists.

8) Has there been any evaluation of this work?

Yes, each year, those responsible for the catechetical program meet together for one day to evaluate their work. This is a time of weighing matters, exchanging ideas, thinking things over together, and it is a time of celebration. We generally are convinced that this exchange of experiences is very enriching. The closing Eucharistic Celebration is an expression of the quality of the work done and reveals the depth of consciousness in our work with the ministry of the word.

9) What positive aspects do you find in your work of animation?

I should like to briefly list, without any order of priority, some of the aspects which I have observed.

— The unification of the program and methods have had positive effects;

— the catechists become certain that they are helping the children learn "something".

— the mothers attest to a new personal commitment of a more apostolic dynamism;

— in the schools, their Christian witness is sometimes stronger than that of the teachers;

— the catechesis in the schools has been improved;

— there now exists a small group of faithful catechists who assure the continuity of this programme, and the less permanent members assure an enriching newness;

— the educational communities have become more dynamic by the creation of a Pastoral Council in the schools. This Council is representative of the different components of the educational community;

— the catechists recognize that their work inspires them to a more Christian and evangelical life;

— in the school, for example, the Mother Catechists organise an hour of community prayer, fortnightly;

— some other mothers have also organised retreats for the teachers and parents in order to contribute to the Christian animation of the educational community.

This enumeration does not pretend to be complete. It is sufficient to underscore the importance and the interest of the task. It is a good way of sharing our ministry of Christian education with lay people.

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