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THE SCHOOL OUTSIDE THE WALLS

A progressive discovery

Ever since 1980, as a De La Salle Brother, following the footsteps of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, I found myself progressively involved in a mission to the poorest of the poor. First of all, this was with students of a "pre-professional level" which, in France, regroups children in difficulty; and at the same time I made my first contact with gipsy children through the influence of the diocesan chaplain in charge of this pastoral mission.

On All Saints' Day in 1981, in company with the regional chaplain of the Travelling People, I met the Romanies for the first time. That meeting, I firmly believe, was for me, very frankly, a revelation, a sign from God. I was seduced, conquered, by the very simplicity of these folk, by their sincere and friendly approach.

The Chaplain had introduced me to these pauper families, but now I had to make my way alone to get to know them personally. That wasn't easy! I wanted to contact them, but what was I to say really? What was I to do? I was a teacher; I had done many things for children which had taken up much of my time, but here, I felt drawn by a call towards these folk on the margin of society quite, quite different from those I had been in the habit of meeting normally.

I knew I would have to deal with another world, other life-habits. I felt that I had to get rid of ready-made, inbred ideas. I would go to their "school" and learn everything from them. I would have to listen and observe very hard indeed and keep my counsel. I was taking my first steps in a society about which I knew absolutely nothing. The world of the poor was near at hand and near at heart, I couldn't escape from it.

Courage for the Encounter

In order to meet the Romanies, I took my courage in both hands and drove slowly up and down the streets on the outskirts of the city. I

found them near the public dumps, in isolated spots, in empty lots. I made acquaintance with them, passed the time of day, discussed things with them. We got to know each other... to appreciate each other... in a way "to tame" each other. Little by little, some families came to our community to spend a time here, to share a meal and to sing. These links of friendship continued to grow until the day when one family asked me to become godfather to their sixth child.

That day I understood the long road I had traveled. Until then, despite so many meetings, I had remained an outsider, but with the baptism of Heïdi, three years old, I became for that family the "kirvo", the godfather, which obliged me to become more "of the family", nearer to them all.

Since then, we have lived unforgettable times. Amongst these the greatest were First Communion days, pilgrimages to Lourdes, times of misery and troublesome court actions. Today after six years of meetings, exchanges and mutual listening, we are ready to go a bit further along the road of education, for we have been talking together from the start about schooling, reading, etc.. School for the travelling people is no part of their lives. Everything goes along day by day as if the school never existed. It was much too remote for them or they were made to feel unwelcome. The parents and the clan take care to initiate the youngest children into the simplest things, but they are all unable to read and they depend on friends to discuss written plans or decipher official letters.

A Travelling People

Since January 1987, I have been going into this "wild" terrain three afternoons weekly. The vehicle bought by the District allows me to take in six to eight children at a time. I keep them for an hour and a half and teach them the first elements of reading, writing and arithmetic, normally working in groups, often dealing with them individually.

For the time being, my job is in an experimental stage since I am working individually before requesting the State educational authorities to create an official teaching position for someone who will take care of the schooling of the travelling People's children, as has been done several times for the Brothers in the Paris region.

I have a total of about twenty children whom I meet and instruct. These poor children who have no access to the official or "obligatory" school, can now get instruction because the school comes to them. The "school on wheels" is their

means of learning, of becoming a little bit like the "gadgé" (the nongypsies).

The children wait impatiently for the arrival of the school-bus and don't have to be begged to take their places in this little "world of knowledge".

An adapted type of education

We owe the methods we have adopted to the extensive pedagogical research of Brother Etienne of Nantes. These very simple and highly motivated methods give very fast and positive results. The pupils learn to read by means of a card game. On the cards are depicted (in drawing and writing) the ten fundamental sounds of the French language: ON, IN, UN, OI, AN, OU, EN, AU, AI.

The children are given a permit to read and when three or four stages are passed successfully, they receive a kind of scholarship of 100 francs. Thus, at the ages of 10, 13 or 16 years, they can go for the first time to a bookstore to buy books.

Up to this time, the Bible, given to each family, is the book where the children take their first steps as young readers. And what a joy it is to be present at a Mission and to see and hear a youngster reading a passage from the Word of God in front of all the grown-ups!

This is the result of many an afternoon spent in the mobile school, afternoons that the youngsters could well spend running about the country side. But they come gladly and are not in any hurry to leave this haven of knowledge. Rather they often oblige me to stay on beyond the regular time to go over a problem with them or read another story.

If only the pupils in my ordinary classes at school had the same appetite for learning!

In the Lasallian tradition

The "travelers" understand perfectly why I do what I do. They know that I am a "schoolmaster" as they say and they trust my professional capacity, but they are also aware that I am a religious, a Brother of the Christian Schools and therein they discover the real meaning of my dedication. After having seen the film "La Rencontre de Parménie" (the English title is: "Who Are My Own") during a faith-encounter, they understood better all that the Brothers stand for. They saw how Saint De La Salle loved poor children and they were happy to see that in 1987, his work continues.

Maybe it's quite a modest job! But it is work being done now more and more by others. In Perpignan, several young Lasallians preparing for the Congress of "Quebec 87" have already volunteered their services part-time to work with gypsy children. Some teachers at the school have also offered to help. Actually, although it may be a small thing, the "travelling children" and their instruction are definitely a part of my "ministry" as a Brother of the Christian Schools.

The love for the very poorest, of which the Founder speaks, is ever present in my life today, and in my plans. Besides this work of teaching reading and writing, I belong to the Parish group in charge of the Gypsies or the "Travelling People". Our frequent meetings are mutually enriching and help us to further the Kingdom of God in a marginalized society. And this Kingdom is not necessarily built by words alone; more often by action where the qualities of the poorest are recognized and appreciated.

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