

**THE NEUCHATEL
CATHOLIC INSTITUTE**

**A CENTURY OF TEACHING
FOREIGN LANGUAGES (1/2)**

1988 marked the 125th anniversary of the Brothers' arrival in Neuchatel. This was not the first Lasallian foundation in Switzerland, for that took place in 1750, only thirty years after the death of the Founder. In fact, apart from Rome, Switzerland is the first country the Institute spread to. What is more, the first biographer of John Baptist de La Salle was Brother Bernard, a native of Fribourg in Switzerland.

Many of the first Lasallian foundations in Switzerland encountered a great many difficulties and did not survive long. The primary school in Neuchatel, however, can take pride in having lasted longer. As far back as 1863, the local parish priest persuaded the Superior General, Brother Philippe, to send three Brothers to take charge of a run-down primary school, and the Institute is still running the school. To found a religious community in Neuchatel was not an easy thing to do in the middle of the 19th century, because the Canton authorities were not in favour of such a move in a town where there had been no Catholic presence from the time of the Reformation to the beginning of the 19th century.

The Opening of the Boarding School in 1893.

Thirty years after the arrival of the Brothers, a boarding school was opened next to the primary school. It was a modest start: in the first few years, numbers were low, and boarders were lodged in a local hotel provided for their use. This is how the boarding school which is the subject of this article started.

At first the school grew slowly and it was only after 1925 that it really expanded. The numbers of boarders reached their peak between 1950 and 1970, when they totalled almost 200. Such an increase in numbers made it necessary for some of the boarders to transfer to other premises in the Abbey of Fontaine Andre which the Brothers had bought in 1954.

For a variety of reasons, there are now only 90 boarders per year: numbers have been reduced because of the shortage of Brothers; dormitories have been transformed into rooms; and more space has been provided for the recreational needs

and leisure activities of the youngsters we have to cater for these days.

Our Intake.

The educational system in Switzerland is in the hands of the various Canton Governments, and so it tends to vary accordingly. In general terms it can be said that compulsory education lasts 9 years (10 in some Cantons) and begins at the age of 6 or 7.

At the age of 15 or 16, pupils have to choose between continuing their secondary education in a Gymnase (Grammar School), or train as apprentices and learn a craft. The Law says no one below the age of 16 can become an apprentice. The immaturity of candidates and the shortage of places on apprenticeship courses, combine to extend this pre-apprenticeship period which then serves as a year during which decisions about future careers can be made.

There are three official languages in Switzerland, and in many crafts and professions a knowledge of French, German and Italian is desirable if not absolutely essential. It is, of course, a plus when promotion is sought. Because of this, boarding schools have been opened in various Cantons, in which boys and girls from Cantons where another language is spoken, come to learn an extra language and benefit from their contact with a different linguistic and cultural context, all of which will prove useful during their apprenticeship. All these boarding schools are private. Many of them are run by Sisters, Catholic lay people and the one in Neuchatel, by the Brothers. Some of these schools have foreign students also.

The Catholic Institute of Neuchatel, run by the Brothers in a French-speaking Canton, is almost a hundred years old. Every year it takes in 90 German-speaking boys for one academic year and helps them to improve their French.

A Few Words about these Students.

These boys are aged between 15 and 17. They are usually students with learning difficulties, and the reason they were not able to continue their secondary school studies in a Gymnase was either because they were slow learners, or had fallen behind in their studies, or simply because they had not worked hard enough.

For about 5% of them, this year at the Catholic Institute is only a postponement: at the end of it they will be able to take up their studies in a non-specialist Gymnase or in one offering commercial studies. Some go to a teacher training college to train as primary school teachers. Others go to special schools run by the Postal Service or the National Railways.

45% of the students leave the Institute for a period of apprenticeship run by firms and are able in this way to obtain qualifications.

40% leave and get a job, learning the skills they need in the course of their work. The kind of work they do is quite varied and includes engineering, electronics, electrical work, carpentry, catering, nursing and even agriculture.

Fortunately, up till now, all our students have been placed on leaving the Institute. This is largely due to the support and help of parents and of professional career advisers who are available to guide them in their choices.

On leaving the Institute, students, with very few exceptions, go back to their own Canton to do their apprenticeship with a firm and under the supervision of the manager. The manager follows their progress and pays them a small wage according to the work they do. Once or twice a week, these apprentices go back to school to learn the theoretical side of their craft. According to the craft, apprenticeship lasts between 2 and 4 years. At the end of this period, the employer is under no obligation to offer a job to the youngster, although this often does happen. The youngster, on the other hand, has to find himself a permanent job and do his military service. In Switzerland, military service consists of an initial period of 4 months, followed by periodical training sessions up till the age of 40, adding up to between 2 and 3 years of service in all.

Recruitment of Pupils.

The reader will have realised from what has been said that one of the special characteristics of our establishment is that its catchment area is not in any way local: our students come from the central area of German-speaking Switzerland.

And yet, up till now, we have had no trouble in filling all available places each year. We do not advertise at all: people hear about our boarding school by word of mouth. In fact what usually happens is that the number of applications exceeds the number of places available. And so each year there is a waiting list.

We are careful, however, not to be over optimistic, as the pupils now in their tenth year of compulsory education belong to an age group affected by a decrease in birth rate.

As years go past, we notice that a large proportion of our students are the sons of Old Boys of the Catholic Institute, or members of their family. Others have heard about the Institute from Old Boys living in their area. We insist, however, that students who come to us do so of their own free will and not because of parental pressure: as one can imagine, boarding school life does not appeal to many adolescents nowadays because of the restrictions that have to be imposed. The willingness of students to spend a year with us is a point we watch for in the preliminary interview we have with each of them before enrolment.

A Boarding School for the Study of French.

Another special characteristic of our Catholic Institute by comparison with most other Lasallian schools in the world, is that we keep our students for only 10 months: our school population changes completely each year. The reason for this is that the aim of the courses we offer is to improve

knowledge of French. While this is the overriding objective of our teaching, it is not the only one.

For a fairly long time, we admitted students without insisting on an adequate knowledge of French; but eventually we realised that those whose standard was too low soon became discouraged and did not settle down during their year in the Institute. And so, recently we have introduced a test to assess knowledge of French, which the prospective student takes on enrolment.

We have also recently begun to run special courses for weaker students in an attempt to offer them teaching that is more adapted to their needs and level of intelligence.

The 90 students are divided up into 4 parallel groups or classes according to their competence in French. At the end of the school year, the top two classes sit an exam set by the Alliance française; while the other two groups sit one set by the Association of Swiss Private Schools, which is somewhat easier. Results in both exams are regularly very satisfying, students achieving a pass rate of between 80 and 90%. The diplomas they receive do not confer any legal or professional rights, but they do have quite a standing and help students quite often in their search for a career.

French, but also other Subjects.

Given the aims of the boarding school, the teaching of French dominates both the curriculum and the weekly timetable, taking up 17 40 minute periods per week. Other subjects are taught also, but in French, as part of the process of improving fluency. These include accounting, commercial arithmetic, typing, civics, Third World studies, training in the practical problems of everyday life and catechism.

In addition, students have to choose one or two optional subjects from among the following: English, Italian, algebra and geometry, music and information technology.

In all, students have at least 36 periods of class per week plus study in the evening. This is quite a heavy timetable, in particular for students who have learning difficulties, and some find it difficult to cope with.

To help students improve their command of French, it is suggested they use it even outside classtime. Formerly, pressure was put on students to do so by a system of punishments and rewards; but times have changed and it has become more and more difficult to insist on such things.

There are 5 Brothers and a number of lay people working in boarding school at present. Together they seek to improve methods used in teaching the various subjects as well as the organisation of time outside school hours.

Brothers Richard Böhi and Romon Frey.