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THE NEUCHATEL CATHOLIC INSTITUTE

A CENTURY OF TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES (2/2)

Outside Schools Hours

Another characteristic of the Institute is that all the students are boarders. They go home and visit their parents regularly every other weekend, of course, but that still leaves the rest of the time to be organised. This is something the Brothers are mostly responsible for, although lay people do take their turn at supervision during the day. Because of this, the Brothers have a lighter teaching load, and take over supervision in the evenings and at weekends when the boarders are there.

One of the Brothers' concerns is to ensure contact between the boarders and the French-speaking people of Neuchatel, a contact they would like to see improved by its frequency and quality. This is not easy to do even if, when the boarders are there on a Saturday evening, they can stay out in Neuchatel up to 10 o'clock at night. During the course of the year, we organise trips around the Canton and even outside it to introduce the students to French-speaking Switzerland.

There is provision in the timetable for external speakers to come and address the students on a variety of important topics. Such topics include the refugee problem, drugs, the Third World, prison, etc... We organise days also on which group distinctions are forgotten and students concentrate, through research and study, on a special theme like fashion, films, television, etc...

But the fact remains that evenings in the boarding school need organising, and that the 90 adolescents are used to having much more freedom of action at home. Coping with this situation demands a lot of imagination: activities have to be varied to maintain interest. There has to be supervision also, so that there is at least a minimum of order. And, of course, there are times when discipline has to be imposed.

All this is not always easy. It is mostly the Brothers who run the boarding department, and because they have to impose discipline, they are not particularly liked or accepted by some youngsters. There is nothing new in this, but it is still difficult to bear. We feel that most of these antipathetic

feelings are not lasting, and will not colour the memory these students have of the boarding school once they leave. Our lay supervisors have their families to go to, and so cannot devote their evenings and weekends to working in the school. Their contract stipulates, however, that they take charge on two weekends per term when the boarders are in residence. Teachers supervise every other Saturday morning.

Secular Subjects but also Christian Education.

In spite of the problems we have mentioned above relating to running the boarding department, which spring from a permissive society and changes in youth culture, it has always been the ambition of the Brothers, and it still remains so, to give a human and Christian education to these young people, even if it is only for a short period of 10 months.

It is precisely this aspect of our educational work that was given prominence in the educational programme we recently revised with our whole staff. Our main aims which are stated in the introduction are as follows:

– *to enable young people:*

* not only to acquire a good grounding in academic subjects, and especially a good command of French;

– *but also:*

* to give meaning to their own lives

* to become men aware of their human and religious responsibilities

* to develop a spirit of tolerance and justice.

To achieve these aims, the Institute seeks to create an educational framework which promotes:

* character training through the self-discipline demanded by studies, and by living with others and forming relations;

* teaching which is suited as far as possible to the needs of each one;

* a personal interest in the students, made possible by the close contact between them and adults, who try to show understanding, patience and tolerance, while still being able to be firm when the occasion demands.

Education which opens minds and hearts to the needs of others.

In addition to its normal educational work, the boarding school offers its pupils an opportunity to undertake various special activities aimed at increasing their awareness of important problems locally and further afield.

The aim of the course on the Third World which is part of the curriculum is to make students aware of current major problems. This is backed up by concrete actions on an ad hoc basis in support of various minor schemes. Over the last few years, help has been given in particular to India and Latin America.

At the same time, students are made aware of local problems by being involved in practical schemes offering help. Here are two examples:

The Christmas Campaign.

This campaign makes a very deep impression on most of the students and is something that is very practical. Its aim is to help poor families, especially those living in mountainous areas in the centre of the country. These families are pointed out to us by Social Security workers who are in contact with them. Our campaign is very generously supported by the former students of the Institute whom we ask to help us. Each pupil makes himself responsible for a mountain family. He begins by writing to them to obtain some firsthand information about their situation, about their needs, and especially the needs of the children. The main aim of the campaign is to provide clothes, toys and Christmas presents for the children. Once this first contact has been established with a family, the pupil sets about raising the money necessary to buy whatever is needed by his adopted family. It is at this point that the generosity of Old Boys becomes evident, and the usual school fund-raising activities prove useful. When sufficient money has been raised, goods are bought from shops in Neuchatel, are made up into parcels, and sent off by the pupils with a greetings card. The parcels are large, weighing 15 kilograms on an average. Last year, 116 families were helped, which is commendable seeing there are only 90 pupils in the boarding school.

Holidays for mothers.

In mountain areas, the mothers of peasant families can only rarely go on holiday because they do not have enough money. In 1987, thanks to money raised, in particular by the Old Boys, who really are generous, our boarding school was able to send off 37 mothers for a free holiday in the Swiss Tyrol.

Other things have been done at one time or another, mostly less expensive, but which have made an impression on the pupils. There have been, for example, contacts, visits and sports fixtures with the local prison; and similar contacts with adolescents between the ages of 16 and 20 in a youth remand centre; and so on...

Christian education.

Most of our pupils come from Catholic families, but there are a few Protestants among them. In addition to the weekly religion lessons which are part of the curriculum, the Catholic Institute organises also the following:

- * Each class goes on an annual retreat with its classmaster. The retreat usually takes the form of a camp-cum-retreat, somewhere away from the Institute premises.
- * Occasionally there are days of recollection held in the peace and calm of the Abbey of Fontaine Andre, the other Brothers' community in Neuchatel.
- * There is a voluntary prayer session once a week. It is held on Thursday evening in the boarding school chapel, and is organised by a Brother from the primary school. The youngsters are interested by the different ways of praying suggested

by the Brother: they are encouraged to write down their prayers and their thoughts, and these are subsequently published with their agreement. Attendance is completely voluntary, and numbers vary from week to week.

Old Boys.

One has to remember that our pupils stay with us only 10 months and that, after that, they go back to their own Canton. There is very little contact between successive groups, and so there is little chance of building up a common stock of memories or a group spirit. Each year is different. The situation does not lend itself to the setting up of an Old Boys' Association, and so officially none exists. But, in various towns, groups of Old Boys have got together and meet regularly.

There are various signs, however, that show that numerous Old Boys seem to remember their days in the boarding school with some affection. For example:

- They show great generosity in providing funds to help our Christmas Campaign and other activities.
- We receive a great deal of correspondence from them.
- About 200 of them come every year to call on the Brothers and have a friendly chat.
- Last year more than 150 accepted our invitation to come and take part in the traditional three-day Wine Harvest Festival in Neuchatel.

All this leads us to think that the work we do here and relationships we build up are not merely superficial.

Conclusion.

The pupils that come to the boarding school are usually from the families of middle class shopkeepers and quite well off.

They are not poor economically speaking: their poverty is rather educational, intellectual and sometimes affective.

While helping them educationally – and our results show a certain amount of success – we try to make them sensitive to the poverty of others, and teach them to show solidarity with them, by offering practical help. This we try to do by the various activities we have mentioned.

We try to ensure our intake covers as broad a social spectrum as possible, and so we keep our boarding fees as reasonable as we can. This was relatively easy when we had a lot of Brothers who did practically all the teaching and ran the boarding school. These fees nowadays have to take into account the salaries of lay teachers and supervisors, otherwise it would be impossible to stay within the budget. It should be noted that the Government of the Canton of Neuchatel gives no financial assistance to a private boarding school like ours. In spite of these difficulties, our fees are among the lowest in this type of establishment. This is our way of contributing to the education of the poor.

Brothers Richard Böhi and Romon Frey.