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THE PASTORAL CENTRE

at the Abbey of Fontaine Andre, Neuchatel, Switzerland

Almost 1.000 years of history

The Abbey of Fontaine Andre stands in the north-eastern part of Neuchatel, half-way up the southern slopes of the Chaumont Massif and owes its name to a spring which is still in existence.

The Abbey was founded in 1143 by the Premonstratensians. It has had an interesting history; it was burnt down to the ground in 1375, reoccupied by the monks and then abandoned again after the Reformation. Finally it became the private residence of the Prince of Neuchatel, having gradually lost its religious character. Over the course of the last three centuries, the buildings have undergone considerable alterations.

An annexe of the Brothers' Neuchatel Catholic Institute

The Fontaine Andre property was bought by the Swiss Brothers' Association in 1954. This purchase was considered necessary because of the big increase in the number of Catholic Institute pupils in the 1948-50 period. One result was the need for extra teaching space and, especially, provision of recreational and sports facilities. What was needed was somewhere that was quiet, spacious and restful, both for pupils and for Brothers.

In 1951 and in 1953, bids were made for properties but they were unsuccessful. Finally, the Brothers succeeded in buying the property and buildings known as the Abbey of Fontaine Andre. The property, part of which consists of meadows, is completely surrounded by forest, and has one of the best views in the area. The property covers an area of about 50 acres and contains some woodland and arable land: as such, therefore, it can serve both as a farm and a place for people to come and stay. The buildings are sufficiently spacious, modern and comfortable to accommodate 40 or 50 persons.

From 1955 to 1965, it was used mainly to lodge 50 or so boarders annually. Maintenance work and improvements done mostly by the Brothers themselves made the premises even more attractive.

In the period around 1966-67, following the 39th General Chapter, Brothers branched out into a variety of apostolates and there were noticeably fewer available for work in the Neuchatel boarding school. This and other reasons stemming from a change in the mentality and needs of young boarders, and the desire to improve their facilities, led the Brothers to cut down the number of boarders. Numbers were reduced from 180 to the present figure of 90, and this makes

it possible for all the boarders to have accommodation in the Catholic Institute in the city centre.

And so the Fontaine Andre premises became available for other uses.

What should Fontaine Andre be used for?

From 1973 to 1983, Fontaine Andre, with its peace and seclusion, served as a rehabilitation centre for young drug abusers. These were lodged in the Abbey, and were offered guidance and help by Brothers who had chosen this kind of work as their apostolate.

In 1983, the Association of Swiss Brothers closed the operation down: after examining all the pros and cons, they decided it was no longer possible to provide sufficient numbers of qualified personnel to ensure its success.

And so, some other use for the property had to be found. It was then that it was decided, with the agreement of the Visitor of Besancon to whose District Swiss communities belong, to turn the Abbey into a pastoral centre.

Such a decision entailed the appointment of a director and a community. It took two years in all to train a Director, form a community, and make all the necessary alterations. While this was going on, the house was used as a half-way house for released prisoners, and for other groups on a one-off basis.

July 1985: the Pastoral Centre begins its work in earnest.

Finally, in summer 1985, after two years of transition, Fontaine Andre was ready to offer its facilities to groups on a regular basis. People had known about the Abbey for a long time, so there was no need to advertise, and bookings came in gradually.

From the very start there has been a policy to put no restrictions on the types of groups or activities the Centre would cater for, provided their intention was serious.

And so all kinds of groups come to use the Centre – a state of affairs approved by the three General Councillors who came to visit us at the end of 1985.

The Centre is used by a great variety of groups

In the beginning, it was mostly Youth Movement groups that came, looking for somewhere quiet to meet and have retreats and days of recollection. Very soon, groups started coming from outside the Canton of Neuchatel. In fact, we never know where the next group will be coming from nor what it will be. Among the groups we have catered for there are the following:

– A group of cancer patients, some of them recuperating, accompanied by a lady organiser. During their meetings, patients were invited to speak freely to one another of the problems caused by their illness, how they felt about it, what their fears were, how they manage to cope and what the probable outcome will be. It was all very moving. At the end everyone agreed the meetings had been very thought-provoking, and said that the prayerfulness, simplicity and

thoughtfulness of the hospitality offered them by the Brothers' community had impressed them greatly.

- Several groups of school-leavers have come on retreat with their teachers and chaplains.
- Parents have come with their children to spend time relaxing, praying and taking part in religious celebrations. Occasions such as this offer the opportunity also of simply talking together, something that day to day family life, working hours and certain jobs make sometimes almost impossible.
- On several occasions Protestant persons have come with their Parish Council for a day's recollection. On other occasions, Catholic parish priests have brought their Council along.
- On one occasion a group of housewives came, wishing to spend some time reflecting on their lives and the work they did. They were glad too not to have to do their daily round of cooking and washing-up just for a change. And for once they were the ones waited on at table... by the Brothers.
- We played host to a group of State primary school teachers from the Canton of Berne, who came to follow a series of adult education courses.
- There was also a training programme which lasted 400 hours in all, spread over 10 months, and which dealt with sexuality. It was aimed at preparing experts in this field who would subsequently work with children in schools, and possibly also with parents.
- We have had Christian Charismatic groups.
- Various healing communities or groups have stayed with us.
- And, of course, we have to mention the Brothers teaching in Zurich, or here in Neuchatel, in the primary and boarding schools. These come to use our facilities at Fontaine Andre on a regular basis for celebrations or for more specifically religious reasons, like preparatory courses for first communion or confirmation, and for days of recollection.

These are just a few examples to illustrate the wide range of groups that we cater for. It can be seen that not all groups come for a religious purpose; but we are often told that everyone who comes is struck by the atmosphere of prayer and recollection which is the hallmark of Fontaine Andre and contributes greatly to its influence.

A successful undertaking

When we first started, Brothers told us we could consider ourselves successful if we were booked up for 40% of the time. In fact, in 1986, we passed the 60% mark, which

represents more than 2,000 persons staying with us in the course of 12 months. Short term forecasts are encouraging: we are booked solid for the next few months and especially the summer period.

Groups staying at the Centre can have either full board and lodging, or be self-catering, using the facilities available. This latter option is often preferred by youth groups because it is cheaper.

Prices at the Centre vary according to the income of applicants. The price for one day's full board and lodging can be anything between 50 and 30 Swiss francs, depending on whether the person is an apprentice, a student or a wage-earning adult. The question of payment and prices is discussed with group organisers, and people are openly asked to show solidarity with this approach. Up till now, we have been able to stay within our budget while operating this variable price system.

The role of the Brothers at the Centre

There are three Brothers at present working full-time at the Centre, and two others who have other jobs are members of the community. Up till now, the three Brothers have been able to run the Centre between them without any outside help. They are responsible for the general administration of the Centre, preparing accommodation for groups, running the finances, catering, cooking and maintenance.

The only influence they exert on groups is that of their devotedness, their warm hospitality, their willingness to be of service and their prayerfulness. And they do exert an influence, there is no doubt about that, and many people are impressed, judging by what people say and write to us on numerous occasions.

What, then, is the way forward? At present, we seem to have three choices:

- Stay as we are, and count on exerting an influence through the witness of devoted service, fraternal love and prayer.
- Hand over the running of the material side of the Centre to lay people who would be paid a wage, leaving the Brothers free to involve themselves directly in working with groups. This option is very attractive, but entails financial risks for the Centre, and would inevitably lead to an increase in prices of board and lodging.
- Combine both activities, some Brothers running the material, others the spiritual side of the Centre. This depends somewhat, of course, on the qualifications of Brothers, but is something worth going into. It could happen only if the community increased in size.

Brother Francois Riechsteiner