

IS THE SHARED MISSION POSSIBLE IN MOSLEM TURKEY?

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1. Historical background

The Brothers arrived at Izmir (Smyrne) in 1841, and the following year at Istanbul (Constantinople). Initially their work was limited to primary schools and their clientele was exclusively Christian. These were either Catholics or Orthodox. Later there came the Jews. The Brothers were soon obliged to open secondary schools. Political events at the beginning of the century caused a great number of Christians to leave our schools. Their place was progressively taken by Moslems. Finally, when primary education was nationalised 60 years ago, the Brothers concentrated on secondary schools. And so now, most of the pupils, aged between 10 and 20 are Moslems, and Christians and Jews number only a few dozen. At the present time, the Brothers are responsible for three establishments, but at present are in only two of them.

2. Our former students

Many remain very faithful to us. They are dispersed all over the country and the world. When they are in Izmir or Istanbul they make a point of visiting their old school.

They tell us how grateful they are for the demanding education they received from us: the habit of working regularly and thinking, the good moral habits taught while respecting fully their religious faith. And if they remember discipline as being often very strict, they admit they were greatly helped in their future lives by what they learnt in our schools.

3. Our present pupils

They come to our school at the age of 10 or 11 from primary schools where teachers seem to be greatly feared. Normally, pupils are not allowed to ask teachers questions. Often they have had to memorise

material without having had it explained sufficiently. For a year or two, in addition to work at school, they have had private lessons to coach them for the entrance exams to our schools. These are set by the State Department of Education, and they will have to go through the same process before they leave us for university.

Turkish pupils adapt easily to whatever form of education is imposed on them. As society is not very permissive, we rarely have confrontations with our pupils. However, as good Orientals, they are adept at influencing teachers and obtaining what they want.

Although pupils are checked regularly, they have only two or three exams during terms lasting between 17 and 20 weeks. The result is that they are tempted to work only for the two or three days immediately before an exam. On the other hand, good marks are very important for them because, unless they have the required average in all their subjects, they cannot go up at the end of the year. They are very keen to obtain the top prizes offered by the school, and so they must have good marks in all their subjects. In Turkey, these prizes are very highly valued.

The system of testing already referred to, which is multiple choice and which requires a cross to be put in the appropriate box, results in pupils not taking much trouble about the presentation of written work of any length.

There exist also official regulations which list misdemeanours and their punishment. These regulations make allowance for 20 or so absences for minor reasons supported by an official medical certificate. Some pupils see this allowance as a right to be taken advantage of.

And as if these difficulties were not enough, the Ministry of Education often makes late decisions which are subsequently modified two or three times. This unplanned approach makes preparations for a new school year difficult. What can you say when, at the end of a term, new regulations are announced, which change the rules of the game without warning, and which come immediately into force? Last school year this happened twice!

Those are some of the unforeseen circumstances our staff has to cope with.

4. School structures

Our schools are bilingual. This means that, after one or two years' introduction to French, pupils are taught half the time in French and half the time in Turkish. English is taught as a foreign language.

The result of this is that the staff is made up of French-speakers and Turkish-speakers and a number of bilingual teachers.

Also, although the headmaster is French, he has a Turkish deputy, who normally speaks also French, and

who is the compulsory intermediary between the State Administration and the French headmaster. This deputy ensures that we respect the curricula, the timetable and regulations laid down by the State Education Department. This means that nothing can be done without his agreement.

Broadly speaking, this the context in which the shared mission has to operate.

5. The shared mission

It has to be said that it is difficult.

Two staffs, differing in mentality and training, are called to work together.

On the one hand, our Turkish colleagues expect pupils to be submissive, and take behaviour into account when they give them marks for their work. They are too often satisfied with simply making pupils learn a textbook off by heart, without giving them any explanations. They do not tolerate questions from pupils. One could add also - and this is a national shortcoming - that they do not plan ahead. This often results in a last minute rush to print exam papers, or late arrival in class when a lesson is shared with a colleague. They likewise find it difficult to continue for any length of time to implement a decision taken in common.

On the other hand, French teachers encourage questions, are prepared to give explanations, but find great difficulty in adapting to Turkish pupils in their first year. If they have a 2 year contract, their contribution to the quality of education in the school is considerably diminished.

In addition to the differences in behaviour between the two staffs, there is also the problem of communication because of the difference in language. Joint meetings are slow and lack dynamism and creativity. As for personal relations, they are awkward and rare.

It cannot be said that, in this situation, the Brothers have compensated for their lack of numbers. Clearly, they should proclaim who they are, and communicate the basic principles of their pedagogical and educational traditions. Instead, however, they seem to hope that people will somehow guess what this message is by watching them work. They need also to question some of the educational practices of the school. As far

as I can see, this is rarely done.

However, something is happening. The overall friendly atmosphere is evident and is shown on innumerable occasions by words and actions. The sharing of views on an educational and professional level creates greater unity among teachers at class level. Educational and cultural activities, like drama, computers, chess, charity work, and cultural visits, not only encourage pupils to show initiative and accept responsibility, but they also call for the supervision of a teacher, who has a lot of freedom in organising these activities. In school, pupils help teachers and heads of year to perform certain tasks and to supervise.

Our schools continue to enjoy a good reputation and places in them are much sought after. Moreover, pupils are proud to come to our schools. This proves that there is something good there that is simply waiting to be improved.

6. Conclusion

After all that, we have not mentioned Islam once. The reason is that we live in a secular State and have to be neutral. There is, however, a religious culture lesson on the timetable. It is openly Islamic in content and is given by teachers trained for this purpose. Our pupils, colleagues and parents are, as one might expect, deeply influenced by Islam. We have to be aware of this, in order not to cause offense, and to show our respect, understanding and love. Often it is difficult to understand whether the behaviour of pupils and adults is motivated solely by religious reasons, or also by the customs of a Mediterranean and oriental people. In their culture it is very important not to lose face: it is a question of honour. Politeness forbids disagreeing with the person you are speaking with. One result is that you agree to do what is asked, but you do nothing about it. When something has to be done, you take your time, even if it eventually means a rush to meet a deadline. I imagine that readers from non-Moslem countries find much the same thing in the place where they live.

What conclusion can we draw? The shared mission is possible in Turkey and it has to be worked at, day after day. The 42nd General Chapter has invited us to do so: it is up to us to accept the invitation. ●