

**CHRÉTIEN MOTSCH
BROTHER ALPERT
(1849-1898)**

Br Alain Houry

Probably most readers of *Lasalliana* have never heard of Brother Alpert. And yet, he is worth knowing because of his human and spiritual qualities and, in particular, now that his cause for beatification has crossed an important threshold: on October 17th 1995, the heroicity of his virtues was proclaimed unanimously by the Congregation of Cardinals and Bishops. Perhaps it is time for us to learn something about him.

The novitiate in rue Oudinot

In the middle of the 19th century, there was a little hamlet called Eywiller on the Alsace-Lorraine border, in the Bas-Rhin province. It had only 417 inhabitants, half of whom were Catholic and half Protestant. By common agreement, they shared the only church in the hamlet, which had been built by Brother Alpert's grandfather. Jean Motsch and his wife Jeanne Schneider had 13 children several of whom died in infancy. On **May 24th 1849**, Jeanne gave birth to twins. The boy, the 4th child, was baptised Chrétien and later became Brother Alpert; his twin sister, Catherine, died before reaching the age of reason.

Young Chrétien was a good student, good at games, and good with his companions. If, on an occasion, he thought he had hurt a companion's feelings, he would console him by offering him fruit from his garden. He wanted to consecrate his life to God. As it happened, one of his relatives, a teacher, who had decided to join the Brothers of the Christian Schools, had gone to the novitiate in the Mother House in rue Oudinot, Paris, and from there had written to Chrétien. When he discovered who the Brothers were and that there were some at Sarralbe, he went to see them, and on September 10th 1864, he entered the novitiate. On **November 1st**, he took the habit and received the name of Brother Alpert. He was just over 15 years of age.

The young Brother Alpert wrote many letters to his family from the novitiate, letters which subsequently inspired a dozen of his relatives to join the Brothers. Two of these, his youngest brother, Joseph Albert (Brother Albert Charles) and a cousin, Jacques Motsch (Brother Acépsimas Victor), who subsequently lived almost 20 years with him in the same community, were able to testify on his behalf when the diocesan court in Paris examined his cause for beatification (1929 - 1932). When he moved to Paris it was to leave his native province for good. Although he returned there for two months during the Paris Commune and on the rare visits to his family that were allowed at the time, he spent his life in Paris and in its suburbs.

Extraordinary influence over young people

On July 14th 1865, because of his knowledge of German, Brother Alpert was sent to teach the 4th form of the **German school in the St Joseph Mission**, on rue de La Fayette. The-

re were 80 boys in his class, and 15 of these were both bigger and older than he, and knew no French. To the astonishment of his fellow Brothers, it was immediately clear that this beginner and adolescent had complete control over his students. He was a born teacher. In 1868, he went to Montrouge to teach the 2nd form. On September 28th 1869, he returned to the German school where he took over the top class. In August 1870, he was sent to the **St Nicolas des Champs community**. He was put in charge of the 2nd division of the top class in the St Leu district school, on rue Bourg l'Abbé, and in addition, had a adult class in the evening.

The St Nicolas des Champs school, on rue Montgolfier, worked on a shift system: during the day, it ran courses for 500 primary school children; in the evening from 6 pm to 8 pm, these were replaced by 500 apprentices; and from 8 pm to 10 pm, the premises were used by the same number of adults. The house was founded by Brother Philippe, who had been Superior General since 1838, and his own brother, Brother Arthème was Director. St Nicolas des Champs was a very large Paris community. Every morning, the Brothers would leave the house to teach in the various district schools spread over 10 parishes. At the end of a full day in class, Brother Alpert, like some other Brothers, would go on working, running evening classes, with his usual success, it should be added.

The 1870 war did not change school life much, at least at the beginning. When the siege of Paris began, Brother Alpert and some other Brothers from St Nicolas des Champs offered their services to Brother Philippe as **voluntary stretcher bearers**. On December 2nd and 3rd, with the battle raging all around him at Champigny, he continued to bring in the wounded. All admired his lack of concern in the face of danger, as he went looking for wounded soldiers in the middle of the battle. He was back in class on the 4th as if nothing had happened. He did come back with a painful memento, all the same - the boils that would cause him endless suffering and which probably led to the illness of which he died.

The Paris Commune laicised all schools on April 16th 1871, and the Director, Brother Arthème, sent the Brothers out of Paris to spare them conscription by force or prison. Brother Exupérien and a group of Brothers, for example, were imprisoned at Mazas, near the Gare de Lyon, in Paris, and escaped death only at the last moment. Brother Alpert returned to his native village, now under German rule. After some time, he obtained permission to return to St Nicolas des Champs and he was back at work on June 9th.

On March 25th 1873, he went to Alençon, where he sat the brevet examination on June 23rd. On December 31st 1873, the date of the first regular statistics we have, the figures for the **St Leu district school** are as follows: 5 classes, 303 pupils, taught by 4 "employed novices" (Brothers without vows) under the direction of Brother Alpert. Brother Alpert had made vows for three years on September 3rd and was in charge of the top class with 52 pupils. He kept a close watch on his young fellow Brothers, and helped them by his example and advice to become excellent teachers. The school was frequently visited by the public inspector, M. Hément, a Jew, who held Brother Alpert in great esteem. Arriving unexpectedly one day when Brother Alpert was giving a reflection on St Joseph, the inspector listened and then congratulated him on speaking so well of the great Patriarch. Brother Alpert replied that he could not speak highly enough of one of the most illustrious members of his race.

In 1876, in conjunction with the St Francis Xavier Society, a religious organisation for mutual help, he organised a youth club at the school, which numbered more than 500 young workers. The following year, he had the joy of making the 30 day retreat (the great Exercises of St Ignatius) at Gros Cail-lou (now the La Rochefoucauld school). On September 7th 1877, a little older than 28 years of age, he made his perpetual profession.

A time of responsibilities

Two years later, on September 14th 1879, Brother Alpert was appointed Director of the St Joseph Mission school, on rue de La Fayette, where he had taught for 4 years before the 1870 war. The community consisted of 11 Brothers: 3 with triennial vows, 3 with annual vows, and 4 without vows. Brother Alpert was the only one with perpetual vows. **It was not an easy situation.** The majority of the Brothers were of German origin, and they failed to understand that the school, which had been founded more than 50 years before to cater for the needs of the children of Austrian and German families, now took in more and more children from families in Alsace-Lorraine, who had refused to become German. Two Brothers left the Institute, an event which caused Brother Alpert much suffering. As he admitted to his younger brother, his only consolation was "to be able to pray and weep at the foot of his bed each evening".

As the neighbouring St Laurent school had been laicised in 1879 (and its buildings confiscated), Brother Alpert accepted to share his premises with it. To the existing 5 classes and 340 pupils, there were now added a further 4 classes and 202 pupils. By his love of peace and tactful approach he reduced to a minimum the inevitable friction resulting from a situation that was meant to be temporary but which lasted 18 years. Everyone admired and venerated him.

The new Director was known to be very kind. The young people in the youth club wanted to take advantage of the change in Directors to bring about some reforms which neither Brother Alpert nor Fr Liagre, the Superior of the Mission, believed they could accept. The letter they sent to Br Alpert on January 1st ended by a conditional collective resignation. Brother Alpert's answer was short and to the point: "Resignation accepted. Brother Alpert, Director, January 2nd 1880". Almost everyone wanted to stay in the club and requested to be re-admitted. Firm but merciful, Brother Alpert made them sign a promise to attend meetings faithfully. "And they all honoured their signature", Brother Acépsimas tells us. Within a short while, Brother Alpert had obtained excellent results in the community, school and youth club. In September 1882, Brother Alpert began taking groups of young workers to all-night vigils at Montmartre, and he formed with them one of the 7 St Labre groups in Paris - the largest, in fact, with 178 members. He sought to give young people a solid spiritual training to make true apostles of them.

The way he dealt with a teacher who had acted wrongly gives us an insight into the kind of person he was. One day, Brother Alpert saw a pupil leaving school at the beginning of lessons, and he asked him why. "Brother has sent me home to do my punishment...500 lines", answered the pupil. He took the pupil back to his class and asked the teacher. "Is it true you gave this pupil a punishment on a Wednesday which he has refused to do?" When the teacher confirmed this, the Director continued: "My very dear Brother, you are really much too kind! You should have sent him to me. He deserves a much bigger punishment". He then turned to the class and said: "You agree with me, don't you, children. Your teacher is really much too kind. Just imagine, giving a disobedient boy time off from class to do his Thursday detention work!". The guilty pupil began to weep and promised to mend his ways. Then Brother Alpert concluded: "Master William Keul will now go to the back of the class and do 10 lines. I shall speak with Brother this evening to see what other measures we should take". At the evening self-accusation exercise, Brother Adole François forgot to accuse himself of his fault. Brother Alpert concluded Brother Adole's accusation for him by adding: "And for having given a child much too big a punishment and for having sent him out of class, which is something only Brother Director can do. For your penance, Brother, you will take advantage of a time when this pupil is better behaved to let him off 9/10 of his lines". And with a smile, he added: "If you really insist on the 500

lines, I give you permission to do the others yourself". The Brother in question for ever afterwards had the greatest respect and affection for Brother Alpert (we are told by Brother Acépsimas).

The inexorable progress of illness

It seemed as if everything was going well. Only those who knew him well were aware that his devotedness as a stretcher bearer had left him with serious consequences. The boils he had contracted at the end of 1870 formed a most painful collar around his neck (he called them his volcanoes) because the rubbing kept them always raw and bleeding. The top of his robe was always stained with blood, and he wore his hair long to hide this. Gradually his whole body became affected. In 1884, he was diagnosed to be suffering from locomotor ataxy, a progressive form of paralysis. Brother Alpert accepted the pain as coming from the hand of God, but without any bravado. He said: "I don't care about the paralysis and my other sufferings, but as for migraine, I show it great respect; it brings me to my knees". For a long time, while he suffered his attacks, all that his Brothers noticed was his very pale face and the fact he did not eat for one or two days.

His Superiors tried to halt the progress of his illness by prescribing special treatments and periods of rest. In 1885, he spent two months "resting" at Athis Mons, undergoing steam baths and hot needles, which covered his skin with blood without curing anything. He had to use a stick and then a crutches for walking, but soon his hands could no longer grasp them. He fell down often, at school, and lay there waiting for someone to help him, not wishing to cause any inconvenience. In 1889, he was sent to Rouen for the feast of Blessed De La Salle, beatified the previous year. One of the miracles recognised for the beatification had been the cure of Brother Adelinien of locomotor ataxy at the tomb of the Founder of the Brothers. Brother Alpert returned without any improvement in his condition. He was happy that God's will had been done and he was in a hurry to return to his school. In 1893 he was sent to the health spa at Wörischofen in Bavaria. In 1894, to lessen his workload, he was given a certain Brother Attalien as pro-Director, whose temperament was the complete opposite of his own ("like vinegar and oil", people said), but he died before him on August 29th 1897. In 1895, he spent a month in the house at Fleury. Finally, diagnosed as incurable on July 15th 1896, he was sent to the infirmary at rue Oudinot, where he died two years later. He refused to let his Brothers accompany him there, not wishing to deprive them of a free day which they badly needed.

His pupils and former students were shocked when they flocked to visit him. To their astonishment, he would say: "I'm fine...*I'm the way God wants me to be*". He made light of his infirmities: "Look at me! I'm back to being like a baby in swaddling clothes!" He feared that the illness would make him lose his mind, and he was glad he had escaped that fate: "The only thing that works still is my head and my tongue. I thank God for that, because I can still pray".

On Tuesday of Holy Week, April 5th 1898, he saw his younger Brother for the last time. He knew his end was approaching, but he asked him not to upset the community. He died the following night. Brother Acépsimas notes: "The funeral took place the following day, Holy Thursday, at 3 o'clock. Several hundred parents, children and young people travelled to rue Oudinot, in spite of the great distance. On the long journey to Bagneux, (since November 1886, it is there that Brothers who die at rue Oudinot are buried), the thought that occurred to me was to pray to him rather than for him. Since then, I have heard hundreds of people say: "Brother Alpert is a great saint, because he suffered so much and so joyfully". •