

## Especially the least privileged

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It is a great honour for me to say a few words to you on this occasion. I am very conscious of the importance of what I am going to say, because it gives me an opportunity to speak to you of my country. You know some of its problems and the many difficulties we have to face.

I shall begin by describing the young people of Haiti and, in particular, the least privileged among them. Then I shall say how certain things St John Baptist de La Salle said apply to our situation. Finally, I shall mention some of the achievements of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and of their partners, among whom we are proud to be numbered.

### **1. The young people of Haiti and especially the least privileged**

75% of young people are illiterate. One of the reasons for this lies in their home life. Houses are too small for the large families that exist. The mother runs the home, and often there is no father. In Haiti, 48% of families have one parent only, and it is the mother who looks after the numerous children, fathered, in many cases, by different men. Many young people have no fathers. They have never lived in the family home, nor known a father's love.

Cohabiting couples are more numerous than married couples. Many young people have no fixed home to go to, and they sleep rough in the market-place under the arcades, as in Port au Prince, the capital.

Often they have no work, and so cannot earn their living and afford to buy food or clothing. Sometimes they spend an entire day without eating.

They also have no transport. It is not rare to find children walking for 4 hours to go to school. It is hardly astonishing that many do not go to school. Moreover, malnutrition makes it difficult for them to pay attention from 8 o'clock in the morning till 1.

There is a lack of schools in the country. Many of our schools are lacking in many things: water, electricity, books and teaching materials. The standard of some of our teachers leaves much to be desired. This is not the result of a lack of intelligence or of good will, but simply because they have never had the luck to be trained.

It is clear from what has been said that it is not easy for these deprived young people to attend school in Haiti. Given the lack of food and of money to buy suitable clothes, many of them give up school to try to earn money from casual labour.

Many poor families entrust their children to "middle-class" families. It might be better to say "better-off" families, because the middle-class as such probably does not exist in Haiti. These children are often very badly treated. Called "lodgers", they often work very long hours doing domestic chores. Fortunately, there are some exceptions, and in some families these young people are well treated.

Haitians are profoundly religious. They are interested in anything to do with religion. They take part in ceremonies however organised. Mass can take 2 or 3 hours, and that's fine with them.

We lack the means to give our young people religious and liturgical education. In certain places there are no musical instruments, not even a drum. We have hardly enough song-books, Bibles, or rosaries for those who like reciting it.

Haitians are also quite superstitious. Many have retained ancestral practices and practise Voodoo. In misfortune they see God's curse, and in happiness, his blessing. The numerous sects existing in Haiti also have a strong influence on them.

Imagine, my dear friends, what a surprise it was for us 4 Haitians, present here today among you, when we first heard of the teachings of St John Baptist de La Salle regarding poor children.

"You should look upon the children you are called to instruct as poor, abandoned orphans, for although most of them have a father alive, they are as if they had not, being abandoned to themselves as far as the salvation of their souls is concerned" (MD 37,3).

You would think St John Baptist de La Salle wrote these words especially for our young people in Haiti.

Elsewhere, De La Salle begins by describing the situation of these poor children, and then goes on to speak of its disastrous consequences: "The children are left to their own devices and to wander around at will. The parents cannot send them to school, either because they are too poor to do so, or because they are obliged to leave them to fend for themselves, while they go out to look for work" (MR 194,1).

De La Salle has all our admiration for the conclusion he draws: "God has had the goodness to remedy such a great misfortune by the establishment of the Christian Schools, where the teaching is offered free of charge" (MR 194,1).

This happiness came to Haiti in 1974 with the arrival of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Let us now look at some of their achievements.

With the arrival of the Brothers in Haiti, in Port de Paix and Ile de la Tortue, there began a great renewal in the educational world. The Brothers reorganised the schools founded by the Brothers of the Christian Instruction or by the Montfortian Fathers. Apart from putting up some new buildings, the Brothers also improved school programmes considerably.

A good example of what the Brothers did is the National Technical and Vocational School they founded in 1988. Representatives from the OIM (International Migration Orga-

nisation) came to visit the establishment, accompanied by members of the Government. They declared it to be the best equipped school in the country. It should be added that the teachers are paid by the State.

Another example is the Our Lady of Lourdes College where the Brothers built a large library containing more than 25,000 volumes. The library is used a great deal and is the third largest in the Republic of Haiti.

In the Ile de la Tortue, the Brothers founded the St Miguel College so that students would not have to cross the 8 kilometre wide channel to do their secondary studies on the mainland, or as we say, on the "big land". It should be added that the Brothers were responsible for the construction of a good road linking practically the whole island from end to end and so giving easier access to schools. The Brothers in Haiti have two major concerns: helping the poor and providing our young people with Christian education. I shall now say something about this.

## 2. Helping the poor

I spoke earlier of the difficulty of concentrating on lessons on an empty stomach. A Haitian proverb says: "Sak vid pa lampé" (An empty sack can't stand up). That is why canteens have been set up. At Our Lady of Fatima School, a primary school with 700 pupils, and at the Providence night school, some 1,000 hot meals are provided on school days. At St Joseph's School, nearly 700 meals are provided.

The Brothers help in another way also, by trying to find work for young people so that they can pay for their studies in school. At the Technical School, tools are lent to the pupils so that they can improve their skills at home over the weekend. International organisations help the Brothers to run the canteens.

The Brothers help the people in their part of town in many ways. The local people do not hesitate to knock on the door of the Brothers' house at any hour of the night, to ask them to take a sick person to hospital.

## 3. Providing Christian education

First of all there is catechism given in class by the teachers. Also prayers are said in class and a reflection is given at the beginning of the day.

Even in secondary schools there are pupils who have never received the sacraments of initiation. It should be said that some of the teachers in our schools are not Catholics and belong to other Churches. The Brothers join the parish in preparing the young people for the sacraments. In this they are helped by the lay teachers who are practising Catholics. During the course of the year, Masses are organised on special occasions, such as the feast of St John Baptist de La Salle, the patron saint of the parish, the funeral of a pupil's parent. Brothers and lay people run a variety of Christian movements. These include the EVE (Christian

Life Teams), which meet each week to study the Sunday Gospel; the GEC (Christian Revival Group). These and other groups which meet at regular intervals have their meetings at Our Lady of Lourdes School. The question of vocations is considered in these Christian formation programmes.

To what extent do we share in the mission of the Brothers? The Brothers trust us and give us responsibilities.

My name is Ralph Laguerre, and I have been appointed to give 2 hours of religious instruction per week in each class in the Technical School. As the State does not pay teachers of religion, it is the Brothers who provide my salary. They have given me responsibility also for liturgical and pastoral activities in the school.

At St Joseph's School, M. Jean Michel Altès prepares the pupils of the 1st form for Sunday Mass and accompanies them to church.

M. Louis Max Isaac is in overall charge of the afternoon classes at Our Lady of Lourdes, in addition to being responsible for running courses in printing. He also runs young Christian groups in the College.

We appreciate greatly the presence and contribution of the 4 Haitian Brothers. One of them, Brother Alcuis, is present with us here. He is a teacher at Our Lady of Lourdes and is second in charge of formation at the De La Salle Centre.

There are other examples also. On Tortue, the Brothers have entrusted the primary school to M. Gabo. In Providence, Br René Lemieux has given charge of the school to M. Hubert Lully. In the Technical School, M. Henry Claude Bazile has been appointed to take over gradually the supervision of the workshops.

We have frequent meetings with the Brothers to assess our work, to receive instructions, and discuss the development of the work in which we all share. The Brothers lend us books and magazines to broaden our culture and enable us to prepare our lessons better.

Like their Founder who trained teachers and founded the FSC community, the Brothers of Haiti help us discover the greatness of our vocation as Christian teachers. The fact they are close to us, enables us to see what their Founder wanted. We are very much aware of the misery of the poor children of our country, and we wish to help them to escape from their material and spiritual poverty. By seeing the Brothers work, we too learn not to see our work as simply a way of earning our living, but also as a mission confided to us by the Church.

*Thank you, Brothers of the Christian Schools, for giving us the opportunity to take part in this session. It will enable us to make a contribution to the improvement of the training of the teachers of our country, as well as to serve better the children whom St John Baptist de La Salle has taught us to love as other Jesus Christs. •*