

**A present-day understanding
of the first point
of the second meditation
for the Time of retreat**

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(«En Equipe» - South Belgium,
November, 1998)**

What's the point of this article?

The point is that, in religious life and in society, less and less space is given to hope.

In this world of ours, which is so disturbing and threatening, there are so many young people who view their uncertain future with great anguish.

Is it still possible for them to find some sort of answer, some hope, in a vocation to the religious life and, in particular, in that of an educator?

Brother d'Huitemau, Provincial of the District of France, recently wrote an article entitled "Religious life today". In this article he examined some of the reactions to the lack of vocations, one of which was what he called the "spirituality of the last of the Mohicans". This consists in saying: "We've done our time. It's all over. Let us die as peacefully as possible".

From time to time, we hear Brothers saying this, or something like it. But normally these words express also a deep feeling of nostalgia and unanswered questions.

Given the present situation, we have every right to ask questions. And yet! When we read the first point of the second meditation for the Time of Retreat, we are struck by the similarity between the situation in the 17th century and our own today.

Let's read some extracts from this meditation: "Consider that it is a practice only too common for the working class and the poor to allow their children to live on their own, wandering about like homeless people, till such time as they can put them to work: they are not interested in finding them a school...because they have to spend their time looking for work in town, and are more or less obliged to leave them to their own devices".

Today also, in poor parts of town, or in those with a high proportion of immigrants, you can find children left to fend for themselves in the streets till late at night, because their mother is at work, or the father is unemployed and is out with his mates, drinking tea or having a beer or two.

At many street corners, you can find gangs of idle youngsters who are either unemployed or have been rejected by the school system.

"Their situation has unfortunate consequences. Because, over the years, these children have become used to being idle all day, they find it very difficult to adjust when they have to go to work. In addition, by going around with bad companions, they learn from their example to commit many sins".

To show that, in some ways, not much has changed since the 17th century, we can mention the following real situations which our Brothers have had to face without being able to offer any solution.

Situations

Two youngsters, MA and MB, 14 and 15 years old respectively, return home one day to a house that is like a pigsty - the mother is out all day working as a cleaner somewhere. There is some food left over from lunch on a plate on the floor. The youngsters are fed up with all this disorder and they clear out. One of them goes to his girl friend's house, the other, to his friend's to listen to rap for the rest of the day.

The homework for tomorrow is a source of anxiety. What's the point of studying if you're going to join the dole queue tomorrow?

What is missing is a friend, a real friend always there to listen to them, and to help them rediscover the meaning of certain values.

X, 12 years old, 5th of 10 children. Three of his brothers have been in prison because of drug offences.

One day, during a meeting, a friend came to warn Brother Y that there was a gang of youngsters loitering near his car.

X managed to open a door with a false key.

Br Y caught him stealing his fire extinguisher. He went to see his parents. The Brother had to intervene when the child's father tried to beat up the young thief!

YZ, 14 years old. On returning from the bank, Br Y left a few bank notes temporarily on the table, and then went out for a few minutes to buy something from the grocer's close by. YZ was standing at the street corner.

When Br Y came out of the grocer's, YZ had gone. On returning to the house - he hadn't locked the door through a sort of naïve trust - Br Y found his bank notes gone. What he did find was a snowball and one of YZ's gloves, a clear indication of the culprit. Br Y called him. He denied everything even when confronted with the glove.

The parents intervened. Initially, the mother recognised the glove, and then denied it was his. The father was summoned but he didn't want to be mixed up in the affair. YZ ran off and returned only the following morning.

The same YZ, who was 18 when the following happened. He had just had a short spell in prison for using heroin. We got talking.

He said he'd never smoked joints but had got onto hard drugs straightaway. He admitted he was stupid and promised to stop.

A month later, he is back in prison for three years. He is given conditional release. If he is caught taking drugs again he'll be expelled from the country.

AZ, 16 years old. It is 9:00 pm. Br Y is returning to the community house. Someone calls him. Br Y recognises AZ and invites him in. Hardly has he sat down than he bursts into tears. "Brother, tomorrow I have to go to the police station to pay a fine. Can you help me?" Br Y suspects it's a trick to get money and refuses. The next morning, there was no fine to pay: the boy had wanted to buy some joints.

The same AZ is in Br Y's office. He's short of money! "Can you help me so that I can go to see a film with my girl friend?"

Br Y has heard stories like this before. He feels the blade of a knife on the back of his neck. He stays calm. "Put that knife away, will you!" After a moment or two of hesitation, he puts it away and goes off.

The following day he comes back to say he's sorry for his disgusting behaviour towards a friend.

AB and C, two brothers, 10 and 11 years old. A large family, the father rarely at home. AB and C often go to the house of a woman friend of the family. The phone goes and she goes into an adjoining room. There's money lying around and the temptation is too strong for the two boys. "Goodbye, madam!" When the woman comes back into the room she realises what has happened and goes round to see the mother of the two boys. The boys are severely thrashed with a belt. Later on they admit their "prank".

AR, 17 years old, says that someone has set fire to a waste bin in a neighbouring class. The headmaster takes action, and then calls all the usual troublemakers, including AR, to his office. AR knows who did it but refuses to reveal his name. He is suspended for 3 days. He gets a nought for all the tests given during those 3 days.

BC, 17 years old, following technical courses. While walking with a friend in the Metro station near the school, he is picked up by 2 gendarmes, who find 2 knives in his pocket. He had no intention of using them; they were there for show.

He is arrested and taken handcuffed first to the headmaster's office, and then to the police station. His mother is called to come and pick him up. The prosecutor overlooked what he had done this time because he had no previous record. However, BC is now forever "labelled" by the teaching staff. From then onwards, no day goes by without some kind of provocation from the staff, or some difficulties put in his way by them.

The usual group at the street corner. These are the dealers waiting for their supplier's car. They are clever at avoiding the police patrols. One day, one or other of them will be caught redhanded. He'll go to prison for a few months and then he'll be back on the streets.

The local youngsters are bored. They know the police have them under electronic surveillance. The gang moves to where they can't be observed. Their free time is not planned. There's no sports ground, nowhere where they can listen to rap or to other kinds of music with an exciting beat.

One day, without a word of warning, they take over the room of the local district committee. There's a discussion with those in charge. An agreement is signed with the gang leader. A waste of time...the instinct to vandalise is too strong...windows are smashed, a door is broken.

The town authorities, who own the room, brick up all the windows and doors.

So, briefly, those are a few cases. Other Brothers who work also in poor areas have no doubt their own stories to tell.

We have no immediate solutions, but who can doubt that there is a mission there to fulfil.

Let us dream of young Brothers, trained to accompany these youngsters, full of enthusiasm and of faith in their baptismal consecration and their Lasallian mission!

Utopia? Naïvety?...or an act of faith in "the Providence of God" (Med. 139,2) which has need of man?

Let each one of us answer for himself, bearing in mind the beginning of psalm 127 (126): "If the Lord does not build the house, in vain the builders labour". •