

53-18-B-223

Brother Alpert and his call to vocation

1. How young Chrétien Motsch heard and answered the call to vocation.

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This article is an extract of a study made by the author on the subject of vocation in Br. Alpert, and which he gave as a conference on 10th April, 1999, to commemorate the anniversary of the transferring of his mortal remains.

Not enough attention may have been given to the circumstances which allowed Chrétien Motsch – born in 1849 and destined to become Brother Alpert – to discover and follow his vocation. He was born in the village of Eywiller (417 inhabitants), in the Bas Rhin on the borders of the two north-eastern French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine.

His family background led him to prayer from an early age because his parents were deeply religious: morning and evening prayers were said in German and the Lives of the Saints were read. There was Mass in the morning and a visit to the church in the evening... His maternal grandfather, who built the Catholic Church in the village, often spoke to him of God and taught him to do everything with an eye on heaven. Later on Brother Alpert said: *"I blush with shame when I think that that old layman's faith was much more alive than that of his religious grandson"*.

Chrétien served Mass from the age of 6, and because he had a lovely voice he was soon asked to sing at Mass. He took part in the Blessed Sacrament processions just as willingly, and the traditional pilgrimages of the region: Sarralbe, Bonne Fontaine and Marienthal.

Chrétien made his first Communion on Low Sunday, 1863 (14 was the normal age at that time) and soon after he was confirmed. He prepared himself fervently for these sacraments, and it was during this

time that he heard Christ's call to follow him more closely. He confided in the parish priest and his mother because he was trying to discern the direction of the call that he had heard. Both of them advised him to pray hard to obtain the courage and strength to follow the will of God for him. He added sacrifice to prayer. A great change came over him, as his friends bore witness. The attraction of the apostolic religious life gradually became more defined. But what was he to do when he did not know the different forms of this consecrated life?

One of his cousins, a teacher in Phalsbourg (Moselle), had left for Paris to enter the Noviciate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, an Institute of religious teachers which was growing quickly, but which was still unknown in the area of Eywiller. At that time, the Brothers were to be found in 22 countries (mainly in France, but also in India, Malaysia and, more recently, in Ecuador). They were responsible for many gratuitous local schools. It is true that the teaching profession was seen at that time as a great service to society and the Brothers lived it as a "ministry" completing – and preparing – that of the priest. There were 8,600 Brothers and 920 novices at that time. The needs of education were great, and requests from everywhere for Brothers were addressed to Brother Philippe, Superior General since 1838.

Chrétien received some letters from his cousin that opened his eyes: here was a life of total consecration to God in the Christian education of the young. Was this the path that God was calling him to follow? As he learned that in Sarralbe (3000 inhabitants) which was also in the Moselle near Forbach, and just 12 miles away from him, there was a Brothers' school, he went to see them: he was convinced and decided without any hesitation. Aged just over 15, he arrived in Paris by train on 10th September, 1864, and he too was admitted to the Noviciate of the Mother House in the rue Oudinot; on 1st November, he received the Brothers' habit – black soutane and white rabato – with the name of Brother Alpert.

He quickly settled into his new surroundings where an atmosphere of religious fervour reigned and was touched by the example of certain Brothers, rather than by their words which he did not immediately grasp, Brothers such as Brother Exupérien, his Director, and Brother Attique, the sub-Director. The behaviour of the majority of his confreres also encouraged him to adopt his new kind of life entirely.

His cousin did not stay long in the Institute of the Brothers, but that did not put Brother Alpert off his vocation. In fact the letters which he wrote to his family reflected his joy in being in the service of God and the young, by preparing himself for his teaching apostolate. He had a lot to say, particularly about communion, if we accept what his contemporaries said of him. In 1866 (aged 17), he astonished Brothers

older than he, by speaking for half an hour on the communion he had received that morning – frequent communion was almost unknown at that time: and on his card in the “Personnel Office” of the Institute, there is a note: *“Died on 6th April, 1898 at 1am, almost suddenly! He received communion daily”*.

I am not proposing to recount Brother Alpert’s whole life. But we should bear in mind that his line of conduct was clearly defined from the time of the Novitiate. At the age of 28, he made his final vows, after making a long retreat at Gros-Caillou, today La Rochefoucauld school.

Here are some of his resolutions which give an idea of the guidelines of his life as a Brother: *“To excel in Mental Prayer... Look upon myself as the last of all... To accept any job given to me, not asking for anything, not refusing anything... To love my Brothers, respect them as princes, look upon them as members of Jesus Christ... To nurture spirituality, which is why I am a religious teacher”*.

To be faithful to our vocation requires a continual response to the calls strewn along life’s way, expressed as much by the missions entrusted to us as by the events which some-times overtake us. This was how Brothers met suffering on his journey, painful furunculosis and locomotor ataxia, which were progressively debilitating and which showed the first symptoms when he was 34. In the face of this suffering which he was to endure until his death at the age of 49, he would demonstrate total acceptance of illness, coupled with infectious joy. When a specialist told him: *“In a short time you will be deaf, dumb, blind and*

mad. I am even surprised that it has not already happened”, Brother Alpert replied: *“That’s a bright future, doctor, but if that is God’s will I accept it all, even the madness”*.

In his life with his Brothers, his manner towards the young and the terrible ordeal of suffering set up between him, the one called, and Christ who called him, a privileged relationship. Three years before his death he said: *“to love Jesus Christ with a suffering and forceful love, as the centre, the mainspring, the principle of all sanctification”*. Did he not invite a friend to pray *“for the paralytic of the rue Oudinot so that through immolation his life may be transfused more and more into that of Christ Crucified”*? He had a big crucifix placed near him. He spoke to it as a confidant: *“I force myself to be on my thief’s cross, nailed close to Jesus, trying like the thief to turn towards him and whisper: Lord, remember me!”* When his migraine attacks stopped him praying, he would ask the Brother infirmarian to take him to the chapel and place him in such a way that he could see the tabernacle or the statue of the Sacred Heart: *“I say a few words to Him and I feel comforted”*.

So Brother Alpert lived out his vocation as a Brother of the Christian Schools in fidelity to the call he had heard as a young man. He placed his whole trust in God throughout his life and still more at the end of his life when he was reduced to complete helplessness. Following the example of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, his Founder, only one thing was important in his eyes: to do the will of God. He said: *“What glorifies God is not our impulses, it is our complete submission to his holy will”*. •