

**BROTHER ARMAND HUBERT:
TWENTY YEARS
IN A SPECIAL SCHOOL**

Introduction:

This Brother, who has spent the past twenty years in the apostolate of caring for retarded children, prefers not to talk of the work which he has done so well. I asked him if I could write these few lines though I have not had the happiness of living with him during those years of dedicated service.

My principal and practically my only source of information is an article, dated 15th June, 1982, which appeared in the review "Equipe" of the District of South Belgium. The article was the outcome of an exchange of views during which Brother Armand Hubert answered questions from about a hundred of his confreres at a meeting held at Mont de La Salle, Ciney (Belgium).

Brother Maurice Hermans

Beginnings:

Like many others Brother Armand Hubert became aware that more and more pupils were not benefiting from the teaching given in ordinary classes. For almost twenty years he had been teaching in primary schools and then from 1962 to 1965 was in charge of the fifth year class in a school of the Brothers in the town of Binche (Diocese of Tournai, Belgium).

During a school inspection, Brother Armand and the Academy's Inspector discussed the serious problem of retarded children. After three, four or five years schooling these pupils have still not learned to read. "With your experience", suggested the Inspector, "you could start a special class for these boys".

In September 1965 two special classes were formed. Five years later there were six. Faced with the same problem, the Sisters in a neighbouring Community formed three special classes for their pupils. In 1972 the special classes for boys and girls were combined in a special school. Pupils and teachers went to live at the château de Clerfayt which had been put at their disposal by the Fathers of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary.

Administration was put in the hands of a lay man but Brother Armand remained in charge of education, a post which he had held from the beginning.

The number of pupils, boys and girls, remains around a hundred. For the most part, they are children who are slightly handicapped or lacking in muscular coordination and unable, therefore, to follow the rhythm and programme of basic primary education. Their defects were diagnosed by the psychologists at a special centre for the purpose. There is a small number of more seriously retarded children, some mongoloid children and some very seriously handicapped children who will never be able to read, and finally there are some with "character" problems — disturbed children.

At thirteen years of age some of these pupils go to a special training school while the less handicapped are able to attend normal technical schools.

The Brother among the children

The Brother is, for these children, not just a Director or even a teacher or animator. He is all that and more besides. The child is at the centre of his preoccupations. It is for him that he established the school so that he might no longer be rejected or neglected. It is with the child in mind that all moves are made and all decisions taken. It is the child who must be made happy in a climate of affection, at once relaxed and calm; it is he who must be helped to develop. In a word, the Brother seeks to put into practice the advice of St. John Baptist de La Salle to his first disciples "to love all their pupils tenderly".

Loving them means, above all, listening to them patiently without ever showing surprise or annoyance at their untimely demands. For instance a boy wants a football pitch for himself and his companions. The Brother goes to a neighbouring farmer with the request and the farmer puts a field at their disposal. A boy wants to make a visit home so he mentions it to the Brother who intercedes with the authorities so that he can realise his wish. For Mothers' Day, a child, instead of buying a gift, makes an object for his mother and it is the Brother who finds the materials and tools to make it. A boy cannot make his profession of faith in his own parish so the Brother arranges for him to make it in the school chapel. Organizing an excursion, remembering a birthday, tending a wound, providing clothes and, perhaps, a gift when the parents have too easily forgotten, all these are the concern of the Brother.

When teachers, off duty, use the time for a little relaxation among themselves, the Brother is with the children. It is at such times, especially, that the children come to him with their troubles.

The Brother and the teaching staff

The Brother is especially careful to see that the members of staff remain united, dynamic and enthusiastic. He seeks to create friendly relations among the personnel. He is close to everyone, always available, and aware of each one's difficulties in the exercise of his educative task.

When a teacher arrives late or is kept at home by illness, the Brother is there to replace him. You can always count on the Brother to do repairs when the school is too poor to pay a maintenance man. It is the Brother who looks after maintenance and most importantly, keeps the central heating going.

The Brother is, above all, the person who understands. You would have to have "gone through the mill" to understand how a class of retarded or disturbed children can test the nerves of adults.

How can anyone from outside or from a distance understand the problems of supervising recreation or the school dining room during the mid-day meal? The Brother has gone through it all. He understands, helps, puts in a soothing word, suggests appropriate action. He can often help adults to understand the sometimes inexplicable reactions of certain children.

The Brother is the moderating and conciliating element in the school. On him depends the maintenance of mutual trust and good relations between pupils and teachers, between the teachers themselves and between teachers and management. The Brother is also the conciliator when it is a matter of relations between those responsible for the school: the Governors, the parents' committee and the teachers' representative.

It frequently happens that the Brother is taken into their confidence by members of staff. He becomes the intermediary between God and the people with whom he works. Some will discuss with him family problems and other delicate matters which they keep hidden from the rest of the world.

At the end of a two-page article in the District review the editor quotes from Brother Armand the following:

"I must mention my contacts with the families of my pupils which take up a lot of time and also the work of catechesis. I spend twenty four hours a week teaching catechism".

"Twice I received special encouragement. Once Brother Superior General paid a surprise visit to the school and afterwards wrote to me saying, "You are doing wonderful work which is perfectly in line with the purpose of the Institute".

"Our bishop (of Tournai) said to me a few months ago (March, 1982) "I see two fields of action for the Brothers: running special schools like yours, and working among immigrants. Continue to give your witness to the world".