

Brother Alpert

by Br Jacques d'Huitemau

On the occasion of the transfer of his remains to the church of St Joseph the Worker on April 18th 1998.

A hundred years ago, on April 6th 1898, a Brother died in the Generalate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, whose life, to all appearances, differed very little from that of many other Brothers: the life of a teaching religious inspired by a twofold passion: the love of God and the Christian and human education of children and young people.

Today, this Brother, Brother Alpert, is the reason why we are all here; for, by recognising in him what, in ecclesiastical jargon, is known as the heroicity of virtues, the Church has recognised that one day he might be proposed to the faithful as a model of the evangelical life.

What are these virtues?

How can this man from the last years of the 19th century be seen today as a guide and example for the Christian men and women of the 20th century?

The events in which his life was involved, the choices he made regarding his life and the people he met, his relations with his students, his Brothers and God, all this is something we can learn from as we face our own human, social, political, educational and spiritual situations. He has traced out a path to sanctity, to which all Christians are called. The Vatican II Council proclaimed this message loud and clear. Even if the path is a difficult one, it is filled with joy. As Bernanos made the country priest in his book say: "There is only one kind of sadness, and that is not to be a saint".

The person we know as Brother Alpert was not born in Paris where he spent his whole life as a Brother. He was born on May 26th 1849 at Eywiller, a village in the Bas Rhin not far from Saverne. In a village where the majority of people were Protestants, his was one of the few Catholic families. His parents, Jean and Marguerite Motsch, gave him an unusual name which, intentionally or not, was ecumenical: Christian. Yes, it's true: Brother Alpert's name was Christian Motsch. Should we see in this inspired choice a nudge from the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit was surely close by when this 14 year old boy from Alsace first felt in his heart the desire to consecrate his life to God, and when he met the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Lorraine. From then on, the way forward to fulfil his wish seemed clear: he would become a teacher and a religious in the service of young people and God in the ranks of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, in whose lives the education and the evangelisation of children and young people are indissolubly linked with prayer and community life.

On September 10th 1864, he arrived at the Generalate of the Brothers, and it was there that he died 34 years later. He was now called Brother Alpert, and for 34 years he had to face difficult and conflictual situations: the teaching of children of immigrants, the invasion of his native country which

cut him off from his family, the war in the form of battles between opposing armies and, what is perhaps its most cruel form, civil war, and internal exile in which the political authorities prevented him from pursuing his mission.

His first attempts at teaching were with the children of immigrants. On completing his novitiate, he was immediately appointed to a teaching post in the same part of town, at 228 rue Lafayette, where, in 1850, the Jesuits had set up a centre for workers of German or Austrian origin. These had come to Paris attracted by the industrial development there, but who, because of their ignorance of French, lived in isolation and great misery - a situation which is not without its parallels in our days.

In 1862, a community of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was asked to take over the school and the parish boys' club. In Brother Alpert's class there were 80 pupils, fifteen of whom did not know French and were bigger and older than their teacher. It must have been quite a shock for the young teacher when he first met them! However, the situation enabled Brother Alpert to demonstrate all his teaching skills, which he continued to do in the other places where he taught, such as the St Leu school and that of St Joseph. He returned to this latter school to deal with a big intake of immigrants from Alsace Lorraine, who had fled from their country after its defeat in the 1870 war. Teaching for him was not merely a skill: it was above all something which came from the heart. Brother Alpert never tired of recalling what was the guiding principle of his educational work: "Never let a child go home embittered and ill-disposed". In our own days, this is called listening and engaging in dialogue. Brother Alpert had understood and put into practice what a study by the National Ministry of Education recently restated: young people did not expect simply to be taught: they expect to be recognised. They want adults to listen to them and guide them, while respecting their freedom and trusting them.

One result of such love, is that the teacher does not limit himself to passing on knowledge; his horizon is broader and his aims higher. He wishes to educate the young person in his totality: his mind, of course, but also his body, his ability to establish stable relations, to take responsibility, to use his moments of leisure intelligently. As a good Lasallian, and unlike many teachers nowadays and education in general, he did not dissociate all these elements. This is well illustrated by his involvement in running parish boys' clubs. He expanded the scope of the St Nicolas des Champs club by providing the young people with games-rooms, reading rooms, and a gymnasium, and by organising lectures, visits, outings, pilgrimages and other activities. Apart from the pilgrimages, all this is the kind of work undertaken nowadays by socio-cultural centres. Brother Alpert devoted all his energy to this undertaking, even when paralysis had begun to sap his strength. He gave this club even greater educational significance by making the Society of St Francis Xavier a part of it. This society was a mutual-help group, whose members were married men, fathers of families, who came together on the last Sunday of each month to discuss educational problems.

At St Joseph's school he continued this type of work by founding the St Joseph Club or club for married persons, in which he offered parents courses on the education of their children. He set up also a branch of the St Labre Association founded by Br Exupérien, his former director of novices. The aim of this association was to form Christians who would also be apostles, that is, able to witness to their faith in a world which was becoming increasingly secularised, and to take up responsible positions in the Church. One of the important commitments made by the young people was to take part in the all-night vigil before the Blessed Sacrament exposed every Saturday night in the Basilica of the Sacré Coeur at Montmartre. About 30 students would take part with Brother Alpert.

Here we are at the very heart of Brother Alpert's work as an educator: following the example of St John Baptist de La Salle, Brother Alpert looked upon his work as an educator as a work of salvation. His work was to reveal to children and young people a dimension of their lives of which they would always be unaware unless someone revealed it to them, and to enable them to see it for themselves in an educational relationship: in the eyes of God they were infinitely precious and they could establish with him a relationship of love in total freedom. As one of his fellow Brothers said: "In all the years that I lived with him, I never noticed in what he said or did that he had any other aim in view apart from the glory of God and the salvation of as many souls as possible. For this purpose, he sacrificed everything - rest, health, honours - and would have given even his life had God asked him to".

In fact, Brother Alpert made this gift of his life by his religious consecration. He lived out this consecration day after day in his community life. As he wrote shortly before his final profession, it is important to recognise that Brothers in community must be loved and "respected as princes". They should be seen as members of Jesus Christ. In community there is also often need for forgiveness. He lived out his consecration also by putting himself at the total disposal of his superiors, whatever the work they wished to entrust to him. He described his attitude in accepting this work: "Shun praise, distinctions and honours; show no preference regarding work, do not ask for anything, do not refuse anything".

It was not a matter simply of fine words. When, at the age of 30, he was appointed director of St Joseph's School, which had become a centre for immigrants from Alsace and Lorraine, he hurried off to see Brother Exupérien, his superior, to give him all the reasons which made him unworthy to accept such a post.

Brother Exupérien's reply was as follows: "It is precisely because you know yourself so well that you have been chosen and you will be maintained". Humility, as the most important virtue a director should have, is not such a bad idea. There are many people in positions of authority who could learn quite a lot from this anecdote.

Sanctity, however, does not consist in an accumulation of jobs, nor in zeal, however ardent - to use the words of St La Salle - it may be. It consists in the trust we have in the Lord, in everything and in spite of everything. This trust is put to the test in confrontation with evil, which reveals the true extent and depth of this trust. Brother Alpert had to face a particularly trying form of confrontation - dealing with suffering. There was the suffering of the wounded he recovered from the battlefield of Champigny sur Marne; that of young immigrants he met and taught; and finally there was his own suffering when illness struck. His illness had two forms. The first was very painful and throbbing: furunculosis accompanied by migraine. The furunculosis, whose origin was attributed to his prolonged contact with the dead and wounded on the battlefield, was a source of constant suffering for him for 28 years. Throughout his life, he had on his neck what he used to call his "necklace of thorns".

The second illness affected him even more deeply, because it reduced him progressively to the state of the "useless servant", and made him totally dependent on others. This illness - locomotor ataxia - gradually paralysed his whole body. At the beginning, he joked about it, saying that he had got himself a walking stick "to put on airs and be fashionable". No treatment was able to stop the progress of the illness. Intercession to John Baptist de La Salle, beatified in 1880, likewise proved to be of no avail. When he returned from Rouen, where his superiors had sent him to pray for his cure, he wrote to Brother Exupérien: "My health is at the same point as it was before, and I truly believe in my heart and conscience that I did all I could, in union with the boarding school community, to obtain the grace I prayed for.

The Good Master decided otherwise. "Fiat", or even rather "Deo Gratias". He is no doubt more glorified by my suffering, my powerlessness, my embarrassed and embarrassing state..." Fiat et Deo Gratias".

Suffering in itself is not redemptive. It would be an insult to God to think so. What transfigures suffering, what can give it a meaning, is to accept it as a call to hope against hope, to believe that life can triumph over evil, and that through it the love of God who, in Jesus, understands human suffering, can attain its perfection. Brother Alpert saw things in this way. Unable to feed himself, he said to a Brother who brought him his food: "I really am totally dependent on others, aren't I? This miserable nature has finally to admit that it's lost the fight, and must die to everything! It is humiliated, because this state of subservience is very painful for it. It matters little, grace triumphs, and that's what's most important!" When others came to him to justify the numerous novenas for his cure that they were organising, by describing all the ways in which he could serve the Institute if he were cured, he answered: "Does the Good Lord really need me? Are not all instruments good in his hands? What glorifies God is not our actions, but our total submission to his holy will".

Brother Alpert died on Good Friday, April 6th 1898. He was 49 years old. The previous day he had said to the infirmarian: "I am ready. The Good Lord can come and take me when he wishes". He was buried the following day, the anniversary of the death of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, in the presence of an enormous crowd.

That is the life of Brother Alpert. His human life was in keeping with the life he chose. He was faithful to the call he had heard in his youth, accepting fully to the very end all that it demanded of him.

In his life as a teacher, he saw in professional competence a way of loving young people, of showing them that God loves them, wants them to grow intellectually, wants them to find their place in society and be able to think independently.

A life as a teacher, listening to the needs of the young people and parents of his time.

A life as a Christian, for him faith is not purely a private matter, a flight from reality, but a stimulus to transform social reality, to fight against everything that prevents growth, the happiness of people, and especially everything that harms those who are most vulnerable - children.

A life as a religious, who put his trust in God in a radical way and never took it back, even when evil attacked him mercilessly, reduced him to complete powerlessness, and made him give up everything that gave meaning and human value to his life.

A life as a Brother of the Christian Schools, for whom the love of God and of young people, in the footsteps of Jesus and John Baptist de La Salle, marked his life by brotherliness, gratuity, willingness to engage in dialogue, and brought him deep and constantly renewed joy.

Thank you, Lord, for giving to young people, to the Institute and to the Church, apostles like Brother Alpert. Inspire in the young people and adults of our time the desire to follow his path to holiness. Today, as in the past, you want children and young people to grow up as human persons, convinced of your love for them. But, as St La Salle wrote, you cannot really want this unless you provide them with the means they need, that is, teachers who can bring about what you desire.

We pray that many Lasallian vocations, and vocations to the Brothers, may be granted us and may be strengthened in their resolve. Amen. •