A RELIGIOUS TEACHING CONGREGATION ENCOUNTERS THE GREAT RELIGIONS

Gerard Rummery [1]

The Brothers of the Christian Schools, or De La Salle Brothers as they are known in the Commonwealth countries, were founded in France in 1680 in the cathedral city of Rheims by a canon of the cathedral, John Baptist de La Salle, for the Christian education of " the children of artisans and of the poor." [2] When he died in 1719 after nearly forty years dedicated to this task, his lasting achievement was not so much the 26 schools in his native France and a single foundation in Rome, but his community which would be approved as a religious congregation by a Bull of Approbation of Pope Benedict Xlll in 1724.[3] Suppressed along with all religious congregations in 1792, this brotherhood was considered important enough for Napoleon himself to authorise it to resume its work in France after 1803.[4] Following the defeat of Napoleon and the restoration of the Bourbons, the Institute had an extraordinary development throughout France and Europe and subsequently in the Americas, in the Ottoman Turk Empire of the near East and in Asia. Like its Founder, the Institute of the Brothers was to be led from one commitment to another outside France so that its mission of "human and Christian Education"[5] would continue with the children of many people who were not Christian.

The story of this expansion has two distinct phases. In the first place, it was usually a case of "following the flag." French colonial authorities in various spheres of French political and commercial interests wished to have French schools for the education of their own children, especially as the Brothers did not offer a traditional classical education but had already developed a practical commercial education with attention to modern languages. It was a natural development for the local parents in close contact with colonial officials to seek this French-style education for their children as well. A second phase developed with the missionary outreach of the French Church in the second half of the 19th century. In practice, these phases often overlapped in various ways but for clarity, each phase is considered in turn. A third section offers insights into the role played by some of these schools in today's world with particular attention to the role of a Catholic"presence".

1. Following the flag

Before the French Revolution, in response to an invitation from the governor of the island, the Brothers in 1783 had opened a school in Martinique but this had no continuity.[6] In 1817, following repeated invitations from the colonial authorities, six Brothers opened schools in the island of Bourbon [now Réunion] but struggled to

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[2] Rule of 1705
[3] Apostolicae dignitatis solio
[4] Rigault, Georges Histoire générale des Frères des Ecoles chrétiennes, Vol.III, p.535
[5] Rule of 1987
[6] Rigault, Georges, Histoire générale des Frères des Ecoles chrétiennes vol.II, 551-4

succeed.[7] The Superior General of the time wrote a letter outlining the challenges of living in a tropical area and called for volunteers to strengthen the work. Among those to answer the call was Brother Scubilion Rousseau, beatified on the island of Réunion in 1989 by Pope John Paul II for his pioneer work with slaves long before the emancipation laws of 1841 in France.

As early as 1717, the Sulpicians had requested Brothers to come to Canada but through fear that the Brothers would be required to work as individuals and not as a single community the invitation was declined, although some individual teachers trained by the Brothers were sent. A community sent to Louisiana in 1817 was indeed dispersed by the bishop and the individual members eventually lost all contact with the congregation.[8] After 1837, however, groups of Brothers were sent to Canada and very quickly developed schools in Montreal, Quebec and Trois-Rivères.[9] By 1843 it was from Montreal that Brothers were to answer the call of French priests and bishops to open schools in Philadelphia and New York.[10] Although the initial foundations were primary schools, secondary schools with a commercial emphasis were quickly developed and, at the request of the hierarchy, university colleges soon appeared in Philadelphia, New York and Memphis.[11]

By the 1840's, the commercial rivalry of France and England was behind the many invitations usually forwarded by French consular officials through French clerical societies and congregations for the Institute to open commercial schools in the principal cities of the Ottoman Turk Empire. Thus Smyrna and Constantinople by 1841 already had Brothers' schools established and these were to be extended rapidly to other centres in Asian Turkey. Indeed the authorisation for the school at Kadiköy [the old Chalcedon] was attested by the seal of Sultan Abdulexiz in 1864 in these words:

> *Given that it is our will that all forms of worship and religion should enjoy the most complete freedom in our States, we grant authorisation for the said school.* [12]

Foundations in Egypt began with Alexandria in 1847 and by 1854 the Brothers were firmly established in Cairo. As the expansion continued, the Brothers were eventually to have 43 schools within the Ottoman Turk Empire prior to its collapse in 1912. The geographical spread of these schools is best indicated by a litany of names which included Tirana (Albania), Zagreb, Sarajevo, Sofia, Budapest, Bucharest in Europe, and extended eventually through the eastern Mediterranean via such cities as Tripoli [Lebanon], Beirut, Haifa, Jaffa, Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem to Tripoli and Benghazi (Libya), Tunis and Algiers in the western Mediterranean.[13]

Where these schools were successful there was a growing number of students from different Christian traditions – Orthodox, Armenian, Maronite, Coptic and Latin Catholic – as well as students who were Moslem or Jews. At the beginning, the uniformity prevailing in the Brothers' schools of the period allowed for no exceptions:

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[7] ibid Vol III pp.443-438
[8] Bédel, Henri Initiation à l'histoire de l'institut des Frères des Ecoles chrétiennes, p.109
[9] Bédel, Henri Initiation à l'histoire de l'institut des Frères des Ecoles chrétiennes, p.103
[10] passim
[11] passim
[12] Bulletin of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, No.243, 1997, p.72
[13] Bédel, Henri op.cit. p.110

the Brother's Rule specified that all those enrolled in the school were to follow the religion lesson as well as all the other lessons. Gradually, however, in some countries special arrangements were made for Moslem students to be taught their own religion separately, and as these students became the majority, the Christian students were taught apart. Modern readers probably need to make an historical adjustment to appreciate that very often it was the parents themselves who expected that their sons would be taught religion in the school. This expectation often continued to be expressed in Australia when former students of some of these same schools enrolled their sons in Lasallian schools, especially when many former residents of Egypt left their country after Abdul Nasser took charge in 1956.

It needs to be said, however, that there was an unexpressed assumption that a western style language and education needed no further justification than itself. The medium of instruction was French and although there was provision for students to learn to read and write their own language, there was little sense of 'inculturation' as we would now understand it. Indeed, when there was a suggestion in the 1870's that the Brothers in Egypt should learn and teach in Arabic, the Superior General of the time was adamant in insisting that if this were to become a requirement, he would have no option but to withdraw the Brothers![14] Time and experience, however, taught their own lessons as was evidenced in 1883 by the Brothers' school in Jaffa, staffed by French Brothers and supported financially by the French government, which quickly added the teaching of English to its curriculum because of the importance of English for commerce in Palestine. When this teaching as part of the ordinary curriculum was forbidden by the French consular official in Jerusalem, the French Brothers, very aware of their foundation principle of responding to the needs of their students, simply added the teaching of English outside of the ordinary school hours for all those who wished to avail themselves of it.[15] As time went on, Christians who already spoke the local language joined the congregation and eventually missionary Brothers were required to do so, even though the medium of instruction remained the language of the colonisers.

2. Missionary outreach of the French Church

The widespread activities of priests belonging to the two missionary societies of priests based in Paris and Lyon (*Missions étrangères*), had important repercussions on the Brothers of the Christian Schools in France because of the proximity of these missionary seminaries to the administrative centres of the Brothers in both cities. Typical of this close relationship was the success of one such priest, Père Beurel, in announcing in the Straits Times newspaper in 1848 that he had secured the services of the Brothers to open a school in Singapore, even though political events in France prevented the arrival of the Brothers until 1852:

> *The principles upon which the Brothers' school is based will be as liberal as possibly can be: thus it will be open to everyone, whatever his creed may be; and should, for instance, a boy of a persuasion different from that of Roman Catholics wish to attend it, no interference whatever will take place with his religion, unless his parents or guardians express their wishes to have him*

[14] Dossier, Egypte AMG.
[15] Ichilov, Orit & Mazawi, André Elias, *Between State and Church* Life-History of a French-Catholic school in Jaffa Peter Lang GmbH, Frankfurt am Main 1996, p.112

instructed in the Catholic religion. Public religious instruction will be given to Roman Catholic boys either before or after school hours; but, at all times, the Masters will most carefully watch over the morals of the whole, whatever their religious persuasion may be. [16]

It was usually through this geographical closeness to the seminaries of the *Mission étrangères* that the Brothers were to open schools in Sri Lanka, India, Burma, Hong Kong and Vietnam in the 1860's. As many of these countries came under the British sphere of influence, the responsibility for the development of these areas, initially entrusted to French Brothers who learned English, was more and more entrusted to the English-speaking provinces of the congregation, especially those coming from the United States and later from Ireland. The vast horizons opened up by the religious diversity encountered in these countries presented very different challenges. As the missiology of the Catholic Church of this period was aimed ultimately towards conversion, the Brothers' schools had a strong evangelising direction which exposed all students to the Christian message. The Church's rejection at that time of the so-called 'pagan religions' meant that the Brothers rejoiced in the conversion and baptism of numbers of their students. In what is now modern day Malaysia, however, as more Moslems came to the schools, exemption from the formal catechism classes was allowed for and Moslem teaching was provided by local *imams.*

During the second half of the 19th century, one of the significant learnings by those in charge of the congregation was that Brothers assigned to 'missionary work' in these lands usually wished to remain there for the rest of their lives, even if their wishes in this regard were not always respected. Late 19th century photographs of Brothers' communities in 'mission' lands show that all the members without exception were bearded, this 'privilege' being accorded to them as a sign of their life-commitment to this work.

3. The situation today

Most of the surviving schools founded by the De La Salle Brothers during the 19th century in Asia minor, north Africa and Asia usually have a minority of Christian students today, but the schools continue to be known as Christian schools and the fact that they are patronised, and sometimes even strongly supported by parents who are Moslem or Hindu, Confucianist, Shintoist or Buddhist seems to show that they have an integral position in the societies in which they are found. Space does not allow for an exhaustive treatment of such a vast topic but here are some examples that show ways in which development of different attitudes towards interreligious relationships has taken place.

3.1 Collège des Frères, Tripoli – Deddah El Khoura [17]

When this school in the north of Lebanon opened in 1886 it was attended by Catholic and Orthodox Christians and by Moslems who were mostly Sunnites but who included some Alouites. From the outset it was the policy of the school to accept non-

[16] Cited from *The Lasallian Mission of Human and Christian Education, A Shared Mission*, document of the General Council of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, April 1997, p.14
[17] Bulletin of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, No.243, 1997 pp.69-71

Christian pupils. At present, Moslem pupils represent some 56% of the school population and will increase rapidly as the city of Tripoli is 95% Moslem. In the centenary year of the school 1986, when the school in the inner city was to be completely re-built, Moslem former students advised the administration to move the school to Deddah, a Christian village some 10 kilometres out of the city, because of the growing fanaticism of Hezbollah which was infiltrating parts of Lebanon from neighbouring countries. When the Brothers pointed out the difficulty this would pose for the majority who lived in Tripoli, local Moslem officials, many of them former students, organised buses for the daily transport of students. Religious instruction remains an essential part of the school curriculum, classes being divided for one hour each week for separate classes for Christians and Moslems. Each morning, teachers give a 'reflection' addressed to the whole class on some inspirational moral or religious topic. The various youth movements, such as scouting groups or aid for those in need, are open to all, irrespective of their religion. A common axis of the curriculum is the story of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his dedication to the education of the poor. This sense of belonging to an international network of schools and institutions enables all pupils to be involved in international meetings and in the sponsoring of works in less-developed countries. Teachers in the school are now in the majority Moslem, but the various administrative bodies of the school itself and its parents' and former students' auxiliary committees are set up with equal representation from both Christian and Moslem groups.

Such a summary account of what works well needs to be counter-balanced by reference to the very real difficulties encountered during the civil war after 1975. A former pupil, Khaldoun El Sharif, 34 years of age at the time of writing in 1990, recalls some aspects of this period:

> *In 1975 when the winds of the civil war began to blow in Lebanon I was in the second year of the secondary school. The feeling of being Moslem became more important to us and we expressed it in words and in behaviour…. For example, we would pin up in our desks such ideological clichés as "Allah [God] is great and Mohamed is his messenger"… The Moslem-Christian confrontation became a political debate for me and became very enriching for me as I continued my secondary education… I came to understand that the only way Lebanon could continue to exist was if there was agreement among the various communities.* [18]

A school leaver of 1996, Mahmoud Tabbat, writes of his 12 years at the same school:

> *The longer I stayed at your school, the more clearly I realised that it offered a perfect example of the respect we should have for others. I learned not only to respect the religious beliefs of my companions but also to understand them. As a Moslem student, I never felt that students were discriminated against because of their religion, even though the school was a Christian establishment founded by John Baptist de La Salle, a saint.*[19]

3.2 Collège des Frères, Jaffa, Israel [20]

[18] ibid
[19] ibid
[20] *Between Church and State* op.cit. pp.3-4

The school at Jaffa was founded in 1882 for the Christian minority in that city but it always admitted pupils from the three religions. From its beginnings, the French Director kept meticulous records, including a ledger size journal with a detailed handwritten account of what happened each day. Because of this it is possible to follow the course of the school day by day in minute detail down to the present day. The first Brother Director endeared himself and the school to the Jewish population of the city when he lost his own life in trying to save a young Jewish pupil from drowning.

The fact that this school has a continuous existence since its foundation indicates quite clearly that the school managed to continue to serve the needs of the local population. In April 1948, the school closed as thousands of Arabs left Jaffa and the future of the school seemed uncertain. In October 1948, announcements of the re-opening of the school in the Hebrew, Arabic (Al-Yom) and English (Palestine Post) newspapers led gradually to many new students being enrolled, the majority being Jewish immigrants from Eastern European and Balkan countries. The father of the very first boy enrolled had been a student of the Brothers' school in Sofia, Bulgaria.[21] In many other cases the parents had known the Brothers' schools directly or through their relatives. Along with other Christian institutions in the newly-established state of Israel, the school had to weather the storm of the "anti-missionary campaign" of the 1950's and 1960's as orthodox Jewish groups moved to try to mould the new state according to Jewish Halacha (religious laws) and traditions. The school gradually became over 65% Jewish but continued to receive both Moslem and Christian students to the present day. At the height of the campaign against "missionary schools" in the early 1960's the following tribute from a Jewish former pupil of the Brothers' school Saint Mark in Alexandria, was influential in enabling the school to continue, especially as the author was now resident in Israel and held an important position in the military.

> *I hold in profound admiration my former teachers who transmitted to us tolerance and respect for other people's opinions… Jewish students often formed the majority in the schools, yet the number of converts was small, and resulted from personal conviction. The administration of these institutions encouraged us to practise our own religion, and hired at its expense Hebrew teachers. Many of us have established ourselves in Israel, fought for its independence, and remained loyal to our faith and homeland.*[22]

As the Jewish population of Jaffa gradually moved to Tel Aviv in 1970 and the number of Jewish students decreased, more and more Moslems returned to Jaffa. Today, in a school population around 1,000 of whom 70% are Moslem, the remaining 30% is made up principally of Jewish pupils and a small minority of Christians. 30 different nationalities are represented among the students. 20 teachers are Jewish in a faculty of over 50. A recent document explaining the nature of the school and a statement of its mission notes the general attitude of goodwill towards others:

> *This friendly understanding between pupils is apparent already during their time at the College. As the feast of Christmas comes closer, it is above all the Jewish and Moslem pupils who begin to decorate the classrooms with Christmas trees and pictures of the Nativity. In the days before Moslem feasts,*

[21] ibid p.62

[22] Cited in a French language newspaper published in Israel, "L'Information". Cited in the Saint Joseph College archives, H2; 8.6.1952

the walls of the classrooms are covered with drawings of mosques, and often the most beautiful pictures of minarets are the work of Christian pupils. For the Jewish feast of Hanouka, all the pupils contribute money to buy doughnuts which Jews eat on this feast. [23]

4. The Importance of "presence"

The late Cardinal Cordero as archbishop of Karachi always insisted that the church in Pakistan would be largely constructed indirectly by the work of the Sisters and Brothers teaching in English-medium schools for Moslems. His argument was that the hierarchy as such had little contact with the Moslem community except on formal occasions whereas for the teaching religious there was regular daily contact with pupils and frequent occasion to meet with parents. This contact, he would insist, leads first to tolerance, and then to respect and acceptance. Perhaps, under the power of God's grace, this might lead some people to conversion, but this was not the hidden aim of having Christian schools, clinics and hospitals. The following anecdote indicates one of the ways in which this 'respect' sometimes had an enduring impact on the lives of students.

Among the traditional daily practices which the Brothers brought to their schools from the 17th century French spirituality of their origins was the frequent remembrance of the presence of God. This was done usually as the clock struck the hour. A designated student would tinkle a small bell and say, "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God." This was followed by a short period of silence and then terminated by the student or teacher leading the class in saying, "I will continue, my God, to do all actions for the love of you."

In 1989, two De La Salle Brothers from their General Council who had been visiting Egypt had just concluded their work by visiting the Brothers' community at St Mark's Alexandria. As they went through the passport control at the airport one of them ran into some difficulties because it seemed he had overstayed his visa. The ensuing dialogue in French held up the exit line for some five minutes, so that when the Brothers were allowed through and were making their way to the departure lounge, an officer dressed in a captain's uniform caught up with them and asked in French the cause of the holdup. In the conversation that followed when the Brothers identified themselves as De La Salle Brothers, the captain said, " I was a pupil in your school at Alexandria for some 10 years! I would like to offer you some coffee." The two Brothers, knowing that this was still Ramadan, the fasting month, accepted the offer and noted that only two cups were ordered. Then the former pupil spoke with great affection of his years at the school and of his fond memories of the men who taught him. As their plane was called and the Brothers began to thank the captain for the coffee, he said to them. "Brothers, today I'm in charge of a plane and when I'm at the end of the runway and have received the signal to take off, the last thing I will say to myself, as I always do, is *Let us remember we are in the holy presence of Allah!* You taught me that!"[24]

[23] Interview with Frère Henri Helou cited in Bulletin No.243, op.cit. p.67
[24] A personal experience

The reason for the presence of Christian schools in cultures that are not Christian has certainly changed radically since many of these schools were first begun in the 19th century. The 'conversion' model which prevailed at the time of their arrival has been replaced by one which emphasises rather the role of presence, the first step in contemporary thinking about interreligious dialogue. The respect for the cultures in which they found themselves in no way prevented the Brothers from affirming Gospel principles as the foundation on which their schools were conducted. But this is not to deny that very often it was the witness given to the Gospel which led eventually over generations to some conversions as the following anecdote indicates.

. When the first French Brothers began their school on Hong Kong island in 1867, they opened their doors to all who wished to attend. Nearly 80 years later, the Irish director of the same school received a visit from an old Chinese man who was leading by the hand his five year old great grandson and the following conversation took place:

> *Brother Director, long before you were born, I with my younger brother, was received as a student in this school. We were very poor and unable to pay the tuition but Brother……. accepted us and allowed us to complete our schooling. Because of this, our family prospered and I was able to send my own children to this same school. So did my grandson, and his boys have all been pupils as I was at this school. Now I am bringing you my great-grandson, and this one will become a Christian. This was not possible for us previously because of our ancestral ties but now as a family we agree that this should be done. We have seen that you have not come here to exploit us, we have never been forced in any way, but we have seen that you live by the religion which you teach and we believe that this is the religion for my great-grandson and his descendants.* [25]

A similar example is that of the Brothers' school in Multan, Pakistan. When the Brothers had been there some 34 years there was still a certain suspicion about what was called by the authorities the "missionary school". When a group of Pakistani teachers from England opened an English-medium school in the same city at a tuition rate considerably higher than that of the Brothers, some Moslem parents initially sent their sons to this new school, often explaining that if the tuition was higher then the education must be that much better. At the end of the first week of the new school term, however, many parents came to the school to plead to have their sons re-enrolled as they were not happy in the new school. Little notice was taken of this until the Brothers realised that the loudspeakers from three neighbouring mosques which had been trained on the community residence since their arrival had now been turned in another direction. This was its own indication from the Moslem community that this school was an integral part of their community.

In Bagna, a suburb of Bangkok, the De La Salle Brothers and the La Salle Sisters founded in Vietnam in 1970, have a school of some 2,800 pupils, ranging from kindergarten to matriculation. Christians are a small minority of 300. For many years, the school presents an Advent and Nativity play presented by the pupils, to which parents and friends are invited. Among those usually present are the abbot and monks from a neighbouring Buddhist monastery. Some years ago, when the monastery had to

[25] Interview with Brother James Dooley, former Headmaster of Saint Joseph's Hong Kong

rebuild the monastery and its *stupa* , the abbot asked the Brother Director if he would allow the new built stupa to be named as Stupa La Salle "in honour of the work done in La Salle school to help our children, irrespective of their religious beliefs, to lead good lives." [26]

After 1945 in Malaysia, because of the prestige enjoyed by the Lasallian schools, Government policy gradually encouraged a large influx of Moslem pupils and an increasing number of Moslem teachers to join the staff. Both pupils and teachers came to know and appreciate the Brothers' schools much better, especially as the Brothers themselves had no difficulty in moving from English medium to Malay in their ordinary teaching. Old suspicions and prejudices gradually gave way to understanding and trust so that Moslem teachers were soon found among the most dedicated and loyal members of staff. In 2002, when the 150 years of presence of the Brothers in Malaysia was celebrated, some prominent former students – Moslem, Buddhist and Hindu - spoke of the importance of their schooling with fellow students from other religious traditions as one of the most important lessons they had learnt.

The following example is by no means exceptional in showing how Moslem teachers who choose to teach in a Christian school enrich the religious and moral aspects of the school through their dedication to their own religion. As part of a seminar on the Lasallian heritage in a tuition-paying secondary school, described in the Brothers' Rule with great respect for both adjectives as "a human and Christian education", a visiting De La Salle Brother chose to build the seminar around the concept of *gratuity* in the origin of the first schools of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. This was an important topic because in this city the Brothers provided both an English medium tuition-charging school and also a completely free school, intended originally for the poor Christians but now filled by a majority of poor Moslems. On returning to offer another seminar in the same school a few years later, he discovered that one of the senior teachers had really taken the earlier seminar to heart. She explained that as a graduate of the Sisters she had won a scholarship to a European university where she met and married her husband, Pakistani like herself. They had lived for some time in Belgium where her husband as a doctor had no difficulty in finding work. But husband and wife, both practising Moslems, were deeply conscious that as part of the small minority of their people who had managed to obtain a tertiary education they should offer something more to their own country and so returned to do just that. In her own words, the wife, now senior English teacher in the Brothers' school spoke as follows:

> *When you spoke about gratuity I was very embarrassed because it made me recall that in the Koran we are reminded that those who have material things in abundance have the duty of sharing their abundance with those who have less. I therefore asked Brother Director to channel my salary directly into the fund for needy students. When he suggested that I could do this myself, I insisted that I would prefer that I no longer received my salary. I wished to feel that each time I came to teach in this school I was doing so for the love of Allah, blest be His Name.* [27]

Some conclusions

[26] Noted by Brother Stephen Kan, Principal
[27] Personal experience of Brother Vincent Corkery, St.Michael's Institution, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia

Throughout their 320 years the De La Salle Brothers have been privileged to work with many French-founded international congregations of Sisters who have an equally interesting history of relationship to major religions other than Christianity. I believe that at a time when interreligious dialogue is one of the ways of breaking down religious fundamentalism and its threat to world peace, the significance of a Christian presence through schools, clinics and hospitals in Asia Minor and in Asia itself remains an important outreach of the Church.

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