

## AN OUTLINE HISTORY OF THE LASALLIAN MISSION IN WEST AFRICA: THE PIONEERS OF THE EDUCATIONAL MISSION IN UPPER VOLTA

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### ABSTRACT

Author provides an outline of the history of the Lasallian mission in West Africa. The author gives an overall view of the evolution and the success of the mission in Burkina Faso and neighboring countries, where Lasallian works are on the rise. After showing the context and the goals of the Lasallian mission in Burkina Faso, he describes the reality of the mission in its beginnings; then he sketches a picture of the legacy left by the pioneering Brothers.

**Key-words:** West Africa, Burkina Faso, history, missions.

### INTRODUCTION

#### *Introduction*

Starting in France in 1684 with Jean-Baptiste de La Salle and the community of the first Brothers of the Christian Schools, by 2005 the Lasallian mission had spread to 89 countries<sup>1</sup>. This surprising growth gives rise to a number of questions. Who were the people responsible for it? What difficulties did they encounter? Given the great differences between the continents in terms of population, geography and economies, there is no doubt that the difficulties, while numerous, were not the same everywhere and were not dealt with in the same way.

The De La Salle Brothers arrived late in Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa. The present Lasallian Region of Africa is made up of six Districts (Antananarivo, Congo Kinshasa, Douala, Lwanga, West Africa, Gulf of Benin), plus the Delegation of Rwanda. The former Upper Volta, which is now Burkina Faso, saw the arrival of the first Brothers at the end of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Fifty years after this beginning, the flame of the mission still burns brightly, in spite of the numerous snares on the way. However, the story recalling these first pioneers to Africa is largely untold, and it deserves to be written down and evaluated. That is the purpose of this article devoted to the history of the pioneer Brothers in Burkina Faso.

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<sup>1</sup> Cahier MEL n°16 ; March 2005.

Clearly, these few pages will not be enough to tell the whole story, but it will be our aim to provide an overview of the development and the achievements of their work in this country, where new foundations continue to be made. After recalling the context and goals of the Lasallian mission in Burkina, we shall attempt to describe the situation at the beginning of the mission, and then present a picture of the legacy bequeathed by these pioneers.

## 1. THE CONTEXT AND GOALS OF THE MISSION

### a) The context

The Lasallian missions in Africa in general, and in Burkina Faso in particular, have the appearance of a true adventure story, a journey into the unknown, a real «*Apollo*» expedition (Br. E. Ramadier). When the Brothers started out on this adventure in West Africa south of the Sahara, the people of the region were mostly either fetishists or adherents of Islam which was strongly rooted there. Evangelisation had started on the coast many years before, but it had only recently come to the hinterland, which could only be reached with difficulty. The first efforts in evangelisation were led by the White Fathers and they succeeded in converting thousands to Christianity. In addition to their work of evangelisation, these early pioneers found that they had to deal with a need for educations which became more and more evident. Indeed, in the prevailing political climate, the local authorities had become aware of the importance of the question, and schools had become one more way of giving a solid foundation to Catholicism in the region. It was in this context that the De La Salle Brothers (FSC) came into action in the heart of West Africa. In 1948, they arrived in Upper Volta where they took over from the White Fathers the direction of the training college in Toussiana.

The mission to Upper Volta was the result of a meeting, between Brothers Adolphe-Marie (Assistant), Charles Edmond (Visitor of Algiers) and Mgr André Dupont, which took place in Rome on Holy Saturday 1947 in the Mother House of the White Fathers. At that meeting, the White Fathers asked for a mission by the Brothers, "*for young people who were impatient in their desire for a really large mission*". On 15 January in the following year, the General Council of the Institute gave its consent for a mission to Toussiana in Upper Volta. The first Lasallian missionaries arrived in September 1948. Travelling via Algeria, they were welcomed in Toussiana on 25 September 1948 by Mgr André Dupont, Bishop of Bobo Dioulasso. The five pioneers who shared the adventure of the journey to Upper Volta were Brothers Bernard JOST, Emile RAMADIER, Guillaume Le MEUR, Michel LEVALLOIS and Louis BRULON. They found they were entrusted with the education of Christian teachers who came from all corners of the country and also from Mali, Niger and Guinea. As the years went by, the Brothers were in demand everywhere. Thus in 1952 three Brothers were sent to Ouagadougou to found a community, and in 1957 Brothers were sent to Mali to run the Charles De Foucauld teacher education programme. After that, communities were founded in succession in Tounouma in 1954, Nouna 1964, Diébougou 1965. The first community of Brothers in Niger was opened in 1966.

### **b) The goals of the mission**

The idea of a mission in Africa and in Upper Volta in particular was closely linked to the Institute's call to be universal as expressed in the Brothers' *Rule*. Indeed, "the *Rule* is quite clear about the need to transcend all kinds of frontiers in either time or space" (Br. Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría; Cahiers MEL, p. 6)<sup>2</sup>. «Attentive primarily to the educational needs of the poor who seek to realise their human dignity as Children of God and to have it recognised, the Institute creates, renews and diversifies its establishments according to the needs of the Kingdom of God » (R. 11).

In accepting their mission to Upper Volta, the five pioneer Brothers were all aware of the difficult work ahead of them. However, their zeal for the mission, their determination and enthusiasm enabled them to overcome the challenges that confronted them. The mission for which they were sent was made all the more praiseworthy by the goals they were asked to achieve. It was a question of strengthening the work of bringing Christianity to the countries of Africa. To this end they were to ensure:

- The religious and professional training of Christian teachers.

The example of Toussiana gives a good illustration of the goal of the training of Christian teachers. It involved the creation of a seedbed for the Christian teachers who were sorely need in the work of the missionary apostolate. A primary school was attached to the Training College as a teaching practice school for the young newly trained teachers. The secondary school built alongside it prepared them for the Teachers Brevet of Suitability.

- The education of children

This goal was identical with the primary vocation of the Brothers which was directed towards the poor. In this way, the pioneers of Upper Volta were fulfilling one of their major commitments. «The Brothers and their lay colleagues are totally committed to the creation of projects to meet the educational needs of the poor and to evangelise young people in general. »<sup>3</sup>

- The creation of employment

This last goal matched the philosophy of the Brothers by creating centres for professional training in Africa. It meant «*helping young people to help themselves*»<sup>4</sup>.

## **2. THE DIFFICULTIES OF THE MISSION**

Having arrived, the pioneer Brothers made great efforts to fulfill their mission. The work undertaken in Toussiana led to new projects according as the difficulties became greater.

The first difficulties arose from being in a strange place and having to adapt to the hard climate and environment including the urgent need to learn a new language and way of thinking. Indeed, the first test was the journey itself. They used every kind of transport. They set out by boat from France or

<sup>2</sup> Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría; 2005; The meaning of our Lasallian forms of presence in the world in *Présence Lasallienne*; Cahier MEL n°16 ; March 2005, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Brothers Yemanu and Marc Hofer ;2005 ; The meaning of our Lasallian forms of presence in the world in *Présence Lasallienne*; Cahier MEL n°16 ; March 2005, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Brothers Yemanu et Marc Hofer ; 2005 ; *Présence lasallienne* ; Cahier MEL n°16 ; p. 09.

Algeria along the Atlantic coast to the Gulf of Guinea. They then crossed through the coastal forests by train and truck reaching Toussiana their first destination in Upper Volta. To get from Toussiana to the other parts of the country, the Brothers had few means of transport. The following extract from a report by Brother Emile RAMADIER concerning the foundation of the community in Ouagadougou shows clearly the problems relating to the means of transport available for the work:

It was in September 1952. Leaving Toussiana on a small truck carrying our baggage and a small 12-volt generator; we took 3 days to reach the capital. The first night was spent in a camp of straw huts in Sabou (no longer there!); the second night was in the Koudougou mission, because the road from Sabou to Ouaga was cut off by the rains. Finally on the third day, we reached the mission of Ouagadougou near the cathedral (which stands today).<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the working conditions were very difficult in Toussiana and Ouagadougou, where the Brothers remained without a community house for one year (1952-1953).

The difficult working conditions in Toussiana are described in the following passage by Brother Yves Paul, quoting the words of Brother Ramadier: «In these foundation years, we lived in poverty (of accommodation and food). Brother Yves was very clever at mending the furniture and cars. He was a very good hunter and working with others he was able to improve our rather frugal diet.»<sup>6</sup>

The preceding quotations give a clear picture of the difficulties that marked the beginnings of the mission in Upper Volta. However, the enthusiasm of the pioneers was such as to show that they were well prepared for and aware of the various obstacles that were part of the mission.

### **3. THE LEGACY OF THE PIONEERS**

The pioneers left behind them a huge legacy which is still little known or appreciated. They left indelible footprints wherever they worked in Upper Volta. The schools they set up served as seedbeds for other works that followed later. Among their pioneer works, we can cite the following: the teacher training programme with secondary and primary schools in Toussiana (1948), the Collège Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle in Ouagadougou (1952), the secondary schools in Tounouma (1954), Nouna (1964) and Diébougou (1965). There is no denying the contribution made by these first Brothers to improving the quality of teaching. Their contribution to the educational system is shown by the school textbooks and teaching materials they produced and also by their promotion of school sports.

#### **3.a) The Pioneer Works**

*The teacher training programme in Toussiana*, founded originally by the White Fathers was the first establishment of the Brothers in Burkina Faso. This establishment has trained teachers for the whole of French West Africa and has been directed by the Brothers since 1948. It has never stopped growing by making radical changes to its infrastructure and its teacher training programme. The changes introduced by the Brothers have made this establishment into a model in the countries of West Africa. It has seen many generations pass through. Not only has it pioneered Catholic education as launched by

<sup>5</sup> Témoignage du Fr E. Ramadier.

<sup>6</sup> Témoignage du Fr E. Ramadier; Bulletin of the Institute n° 148; 1957; p. 271.

the Brothers, but it owes its success to its boarding section and to its good results in the Brevet of Education First Cycle (BEPC).

*The Collège Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle in Ouagadougou*, founded in 1952 is the younger of the schools in Toussiana. Three Brothers founded the community in Ouagadougou. Two of them (Brothers Emile and Constantin) moved there from Toussiana. The third member was Brother Bertin who came direct from Algeria. Today this college has acquired a very good reputation nationally and among the citizens of the capital. Currently it includes a community, a primary school and a secondary school of general education, second cycle (séries C and D). The location of this establishment, in the heart of the capital and close to the cathedral, has contributed greatly to its reputation, but the main source lies in the excellent academic results which make it famous.

*The Collège de Tounouma* in Bobo Dioulasso was opened in 1954 by the Brothers at the request of Mgr A. Dupont. From the beginning, its teaching mission was directed towards embedding the faith in young people in order to foster vocations among them.

Other establishments followed these in seeing the light of day: the secondary school Charles Lwanga in Nouna (1964) which later developed a centre for apprenticeship in crafts (CAPA); the secondary school Pierre Kula in Diébougou (1965); the secondary school Badenya in Ouagadougou; the Lasallian Centre for teaching Agriculture (CLIMA) in Berekoubo; the community and the secondary school in Kongoussi. The latter establishments, although founded only recently, followed the same path traced out by the pioneers. In every case, traditions have been maintained while trying to adapt to contemporary situations. Some initiatives started by the pioneer Brothers can still be seen in various Lasallian schools

### **3.b) Extra-school activities**

*Sporting activities* form one of the characteristic features of the Lasallian schools in Burkina. The sports tradition goes back to the origins in the first years in Toussiana. The Brothers established sports as an integral part of the curriculum. A variety of activities in Toussiana formed the basis for an education that linked intellectual progress with physical well-being through games and sports. The tradition was so well maintained that one visitor to Toussiana asserted «*In Toussiana they do the most games in the whole of French West Africa*». School sports are therefore a legacy from the early days which still brings great benefits to the schools today. Because they keep to this sporting tradition, the Lasallian schools have won a number of national trophies in different disciplines such as handball, football, volleyball and basketball.

*Associations and other Movements within the Schools.* These are closely linked to the development of Catholic education. From the beginning, the Brothers' schools encouraged those associations which would enable the pupils to develop values such as tolerance, charity, discipline and a fraternal spirit. The principal movements and associations to be found in the Brothers schools in Burkina are the Red Cross, the Scouts, *Jeune témoin du Christ* [Young witnesses to Christ], *Jeunesse Etudiante Catholique* [Young Catholic students]. Currently, these movements are still active in some schools, but they need to be revitalized or in some cases even re-launched.

*Gardening.* This was one of the first manual activities introduced by the Brothers in their schools in Burkina. From the beginning, it occupied a major place in the curriculum in Toussiana. Its inclusion

was based on the idea that *manual work is an activity that develops willpower*<sup>7</sup>. Although the school in Toussiana was a pioneer in the development of this activity, it has now lost all trace of it. Only the Charles Lwanga School in Nouna and the Pierre Kula School in Diébougou have continued gardening up to the present. Other workshops (carpentry, mechanics and couture) are operated, and there is a new addition in the form of a centre giving an introduction to agriculture (CLIMA), which does both teaching and production. 87

### 3.c) Publications

Of all the things that the pioneer Brothers bequeathed to us, it is their writings that are the least well known. In fact, they produced a large number of works for the benefit of their schools and for science in general. These include works on teaching and on pedagogy, monographs and books and ethnographic collections. Some of the writings and collections are still in use in Burkina, but many of them are unknown. Two Brothers in particular made their marks in the world of education and research through their writings. They are Brother Marcel Guilhem and Brother Blaise Roman.

#### ***Brother Marcel Guilhem: writer and pedagogue of Africa***

During his years in Africa, Brother Marcel Guilhem produced a large number of writings for African teachers and pupils. Here is a partial list of works done by himself or in collaboration for an African public.

- History:
  - *Précis of West African History*
  - *Précis of the History of Upper Volta*
  - *Précis of the History of Mali*
  - *The History of Upper Volta, Africa, The World*
  - *The History of Dahomey, Africa, The World*
  - *The History of Niger, Africa, The World*
  - *Historical narratives* (Elementary Course) 2 volumes on each of the countries (Côte d'Ivoire, Dahomey, Upper Volta, Mali, Niger, Togo)
  - *Enchanted Tropics* (under the name Marc Gislain)
- French Language: *50 Tales and fables of the savanna*. 2 vols.
- Articles:
  - 'The Notion of and the Worship of god among the Toussians', in *Anthropos* Vol 62; 1967 (Guilhem et Hébert)
  - 'Hereditary nobility in the land of the Toussians: Les Devins', *Notes Africaines* 1964; Dakar. (Guilhem et Hébert)
  - There also exist a number of unpublished texts and communications.

#### ***Brother Leovigildo Blas: biologist and collector of Upper Volta fauna***

Brother Blaise (*Roman Benigno*) was had his doctorate in biology, and he carried out scientific research at a high level on the snakes of Upper Volta. His research was of great scientific interest and

<sup>7</sup> Bulletin of the Institute n° 148; 1957; p. 277.



formed the basis for the natural history museum in De la Salle secondary school in Ouagadougou. The museum has been declared part of the national patrimony. It comprises a large collection of snakes (4000 examples) and a large collection of the rocks and stones of West Africa. It holds the books written by Brother Blaise and many publications to which he contributed as co-author. It also contains reports of the work undertaken for the government of Upper Volta as part of the campaign against *onchocercosis*. The legacy he left to Burkina is immense. Brother Blaise received many honours and distinctions for his work from the highest authorities of Burkina Faso. However, his work deserves to be better preserved and publicised.

This list is far from being exhaustive, but it shows the contribution made by those pioneer Brothers to the human and social development of the countries to which they had been sent. The success of the present-day educational activity in Burkina Faso and other African countries rests mainly on the legacy of those missionary pioneers.

## CONCLUSION

By conclusion, we can do no better than cite the words of Brother Ramadier who describes the story of the Lasallian mission to Burkina in the following terms «a wonderful story, the story of a foundation on solid ground of good laterite rock, the story of the Church in the country of the Mose People through the Lasallian charism of the Brothers of the Christian school».

In virgin territory, the pioneers sowed the seed and others came after them to keep things going. In the course of time, the works flourished throughout the land. The family of the Church in Burkina and a large majority of the young people are still benefitting from the fruits of that mission whose initial frail roots have grown tremendously. However, the story of the Lasallian mission is not well known, because it has not been studied much. Indeed, the vacuum that is a feature of the story of the mission in West Africa is cruel. It shows itself in the young people who have no idea of the context of that mission, or of its goals and its protagonists. This sad situation is a result of a lack of any policy to protect and make known the legacy contained in the archives of Lasallian mission in Africa and especially in Burkina Faso.

Today it appears most important, even essential, to refresh the memory of the pioneers of the Lasallian mission in Africa in general and in Burkina Faso in particular, so notable was their work and so important its impact for understanding the present situation. In addition, in order to promote historical research, the Institute needs urgently to set up offices for archives of the Lasallian mission in every District in Africa, not only to preserve the memory of the Brothers who are disappearing, usually without being noticed, but also to make possible some reflection on the development of the work of education. Part of this need is for the creation of a leadership team in the Institute to manage more efficiently the legacy we possess in the form of archives and equipment.