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THE LIFE AND WORK OF FATHER DANIEL BROTTIER

Father Brottier's entire life was filled with God, the God of love whose tenderness and mercy St. Thérèse of Lisieux showed out afresh at the end of the nineteenth century, tinged as it still was with Jansenism. His life was oriented towards "the poor and little ones", from Senegal to Auteuil — God's chosen ones. It was enlivened by a faith that swept all obstacles aside, that motivated his every action and kept him in close union with God.

Daniel Brottier was born on 7 September 1876 at La Ferté-Saint-Cyr, a pretty little village not far from the town of Chambord in the Department of Loire-et-Cher. The house he was born in lay close to the château; his father was coachman to the Marquis of Durfort. He always wanted to be a priest, and started learning Latin even before he started school. His little witticism, "I will be Pope", had a depth beyond the ordinary, it revealed his personality unambiguously, his first indication of the "all or nothing" that marked the main steps of his life: missionary in Dakar, priest in the trenches in 1914-1918, builder of the Dakar cathedral and of the Auteuil chapel. It recalls Little Thérèse's "I will become a Saint". Both statements are bold, direct expressions of a spiritual type, a desire to live close to God; they link two souls which continue to work in tandem.

THE CALL

Daniel made his first holy communion in 1886 at the age of ten, and entered the junior seminary of Blois the following year. His school companions remember a lively, outgoing boy, even mischievous, but good-hearted. After the long years of the senior seminary he was ordained priest 22 October 1899 by Bishop Laborde of Blois. He was assigned to the Free School of Pontlevoy, where he worked marvels with the

children. But something was wanting, his field of action was limited, his apostolic soul sought outlet. He chose to become a missionary and entered the Holy Ghost Congregation. The exchange of heart-rending letters with his parents and family makes clear that the latter, although greatly anguished, accepted the sacrifice with a good heart.

After a year's novitiate at Orly near Paris he left for Africa in 1903. He wrote the following words to Archbishop Le Roy, the superior general, witnessing to his thirst for the apostolate, born of a deep life of prayer: "I have always envisaged the missionary's life as that of people willing to sacrifice themselves for the salvation of souls". Again, they indicate the "all or nothing" of his life pattern.

ST. LOUIS IN SENEGAL

To his disappointment Fr. Brottier was assigned to the parish in the town of St. Louis, whereas he had dreamt of a rough life in the interior. Welcomed by his parish priest, Fr. Jalabert, later Bishop, he spent himself at his urban apostolate. He turned his attention to the most abandoned of the time, the half-castes. Where many missionaries had despaired of evangelizing them, Fr. Brottier succeeded in convincing his companions there was hope. With youthful vigour he also turned towards the youth, revitalizing apostolic works that had died with the transfer of former priests. He gave weekly instructions to the students of Faidherbe secondary school; he founded a child-aid centre; he published a parish bulletin in 1906 that still appears today under a title he would have liked, "Unite". But the first issue was hardly out when he fell sick and was advised to return to France.

After six months with his family he wondered if God was not calling him to be a Trappist. Nothing came of it and he returned to St. Louis in 1907, where he developed his journalistic talents and organized a band. St. Louis was giving him full scope for priestly and missionary activity; he was creative, enterprising, progressive and disturbing! Prayer sustained all this activity, but his health deteriorated. He had to come home again.

LERINS

A major interlude in his life at this juncture was his stay at the Trappist monastery of the Islands of Lerins. Back in France in June 1911, his old desire to enter a monastery awoke. The following letter reveals his state of soul, torn between contemplative and active life, and his total surrender to God's will.

Paris, 2 November 1911

Dear Martha and Madeleine,

You will probably remember as clearly as I an evening in April 1908 when I told you my intentions of entering the Trappists. You also know how I nourished this in my heart and hoped to follow it up. I made a decision and must tell you about it.

From 20 to 30 September, unknown to Bishop Jalabert and with the sole permission of Archbishop Le Roy, I spent in the Trappist monastery of Lerins in the Mediterranean. I lived unforgettable hours in the recollection of the cloister in an atmosphere of sacrifice and immolation. But the lack of sleep, and especially of food, wore me down and after a few days I had to yield to the evidence: I was not made for this kind of life. I came back to Paris, and now, bravely and without looking back, I face the future whatever it be. There are big question-marks over my return to St. Louis. I have promised to leave all to providence and take no steps, for or against. That is the only way for a religious to do his duty.

D. Brottier

THE AFRICAN MEMORIAL: THE CATHEDRAL AT DAKAR

This enterprise must be looked at in its historical context. Bishop Jalabert's plan could appear "colonial", like building a hospital or a governor general's residence, but his perspective was different. Dakar, of which Jalabert was bishop, was "the daughter of the Holy Ghost Fathers, born in 1846 on the initia-

tive of a young Spiritan, Fr. Arragon; thanks to him the gate to West Africa was opened to the gospel and to France" (from Fr. Yves Pichon's biography of Fr. Brottier). Bishop Jalabert's twofold objective in one operation was to build a fitting place of worship as a cathedral, and a monument of homage to all who gave their energy, blood and life for the sake of Africa, in the service of the African people. Fr. Brottier had just returned to France, forced by poor health to leave Africa for good. The bishop knew Fr. Brottier's potential. He appointed him vicar general of Dakar "residing in Paris" and director of the African Memorial.

Fr. Brottier was enthusiastic that even in France he would be doing a missionary task. He threw all his energy into the new apostolate; he set up a secretariate and a public relations office that offended some of his zealous confreres; he involved lay people; he gave a soul to the work that Christians in France could not ignore. A network of reliable friends took shape that gradually covered all France. He concentrated on the African Memorial for seven years over two periods, 1911-1914 and 1919-1923. It brought out his qualities and virtues providentially; his great faith and missionary spirit mobilized his remarkable human qualities. It challenged him adequately as he brought Bishop Jalabert's dream to a reality. On 2 February 1936 the Dakar cathedral was consecrated by Cardinal Verdier, papal legate. Notably absent from the ceremony was Fr. Brottier himself, who preferred to remain hidden in the hour of glory; instead, he delivered an electrifying address — his last — to his children in Auteuil, who had gathered to honour him that day.

My Children,

I cannot find words to thank you for this surprise today. It is very moving for me. This intimate celebration gives me more joy than had I gone to Dakar with the cardinal. Children, my happiness is rooted in you. When I was beginning twenty-five years of work on the African Memorial, if I had known the joy you would procure me today it would have been enough. People are surprised I did not go to Dakar to receive laurels. I am past the age for human honours; besides, about Dakar, I never thought an instant of human glory. God's love brings events together for his greatest glory. You must know that without Bi-

shop Jalabert and the African Memorial, there would be no chapel to St. Thérèse here today. Nor would I be here with you, dear children. As long as the breath of life lasts we must bless God and sing forever the Lord's mercies.

Fr. Brottier's fine soul shines through this message to his children, twenty-six days before his death: self-effacement, complete abnegation in the light of God's glory alone. He was already living in God.

MILITARY CHAPLAIN

Could it be that the years spent working for the African Memorial sometimes weighed heavily on Fr. Brottier, extraordinary man of action and down-to-earth priest that he was? It entailed long days and nights at a desk, writing, replying all the time, frequent contacts with "important people", from the Duchess of Chartres to the Prince of Aremburg, including Madame Savorgnan de Brazza and General Gourand. Fr. Brottier had made it his duty to alert "all Paris" to his noble work, and Paris responded generously. But this image of Fr. Brottier, tied to the desk or frequenting the salons, is scarcely the one we think of spontaneously. He was made for an "apostolate of contact", both by nature and by his own wish. The 1914-1918 war offered him that field of activity. Eye-witness accounts and stories proliferate about his deeds among his soldiers in open terrain or in the trenches. Perhaps he felt better employed in that situation where risk was daily bread and the sufferings of the poorest were shared. For the fifty-two months of that tragedy he lived with danger. By word and example he brought comfort, he raised morale, he stimulated energies, he received confidences, he prepared people for death. Vulnerable all the time, ignoring danger, he heard and saw everything. In the name of Charity with a capital C he built "bridges" between the troops and the high command and he even changed the mind of a staff officer of the armed forces about the basis for an attack!

His priestly role during these terrible years is expressed in the words he wrote to his brother and sister-in-law on giving them his military chaplain's cross after the war:

Keep it carefully, for it was my silent witness all during the war. How many lips of dying people kissed that cross! It heard the last sighs of innumerable young soldiers. It touched their mangled, shattered bodies. I can declare that if the cord of this cross knew all the blood it drank the water in which it dipped would run red.

The commendations he received are full of the superlatives the army uses; but one of them, that of 29 June 1918, uses an unusual term, it dubs him a "legendary chaplain". A halo of the "marvellous" was enveloping him; everything in his life was "marvellous": Bishop Jalabert, Senegal, the African Memorial, the great war. God was writing straight with crooked lines, down to the thunderclap of Auteuil, still re-echoing.

NATIONAL UNION OF EX-SERVICEMEN

It is hard to be faithful to a chronology in Fr. Brottier's life, so many circumstances overlap. Still a word must be said on the National Union of Ex-Servicemen. He had dreamt of the extraordinary spirit of fraternity born in the course of the war continuing among the former soldiers. He saw the foundation of a wide movement develop. This simple military chaplain, who might be tempted to create "his" association of ex-servicemen along confessional lines, became a forward-looking priest aiming at a national union open to all without distinction. He did not hesitate to involve public powers and he even got access to Clémenceau, then President of the Council. Once again, the driving-force behind his outsize plans was love. The union grew to two million members. Fr. Brottier never did things by halves, it was always "all or nothing".

AUTEUIL

From the moment Bishop Jalabert told him that "Little Sister Thérèse" had protected him during the war, Fr. Brottier sought an occasion to thank her who would become his colleague. He could have lit candles, celebrated Mass, gone on

pilgrimage to Lisieux. No, he would make her a gift according to the greatness of her protection; he watched for signs of providence.

21 November 1923

He went to the heart of things the day he arrived. His visitation took him to the chapel, an old unworthy shed. His immediate reaction was, Auteuil needs a new chapel and it will be dedicated to Thérèse. This would be his gratitude. All he needed was the permission of the Archbishop of Paris. Fr. Brottier's mind and heart moved fast. He would meet the cardinal on 1 December — nine days hence, time for a novena! He spoke to Thérèse:

If you want me to build you a chapel, tell me. I am going to ask Cardinal Dubois for the permission. If I come by 10,000 francs before the meeting, I will know you want the chapel. If you do not send it I will not mention the chapel.

He began the novena, joined by the children's prayers.

The Carmel of Lisieux has recently sent me a copy of a letter Fr. Brottier wrote that very day to the prioress:

Paris, 21 November 1923

Dear Reverend Mother,

Today, feast of our Lady's Visitation, I have taken charge of a work well-known to the Carmel at Lisieux, the orphans of Auteuil. The Archdiocese of Paris asked the Holy Ghost Congregation, and Archbishop Le Roy has given me the responsibility. I want my first action, my first letter, to be for the Carmel of Lisieux for Blessed Thérèse of the Child Jesus.

Dear Reverend Mother, we have met before. I had the honour of seeing you in June 1919 in the parlour during a visit with Bishop Jalabert. I was leaving for Rome soon afterwards and you asked me to take a valuable little parcel to the Carmel in Rome, concerning the beatification of dear Sister Thérèse. Our pilgrimage was in thanksgiving. Bishop Jalabert and I were coming to thank Sister Thérèse for the protection she gave me as a simple military chaplain during the war. Ever since then I have had a special devotion to the Blessed Thérèse. On coming to Auteuil my intention was to place the chil-

dren under her protection, which they now are. I erected a fine statue, and I am told another is coming.

But all that is not enough. I have another idea, on which I need your advice. Our chapel is inadequate and ugly. It cannot serve as a chapel-of-ease for the parish we belong to, as it is situated within the buildings. I would like to build one giving onto the street, spacious and beautiful, serving both the orphans and our neighbourhood, and to dedicate it to Blessed Thérèse. This would be her first sanctuary in Paris. I am sure Blessed Thérèse will love to protect my dear children and receive the homage of the people of Paris, who will flock to this shrine. But I will not start until she herself indicates God's will. That is why I am writing, that you may help me to obtain the sign; and that is why I wanted my first action here to be this letter I address to you in all simplicity and trust.

Little Thérèse will undertake to send us the hundreds of thousands of francs needed. She will also be mother to these poor children entrusted to us and will help us to prepare them for life in the practice of virtue and goodness. We begin a novena to her tomorrow, to finish on 30 November. I dare to ask you and your dear daughters to join us and carry our intention to the feet of the dear Sister.

My respectful thanks, Reverend Mother, for whatever you can do to help us in our task, which you will understand to be delicate and difficult here in the capital city.

D. Brottier

1 December 1923

On the ninth day, as he was leaving for the archbishop's house, a lady handed him an envelope with 10,000 francs! This authentic anecdote was to launch the whole Auteuil enterprise and unlock a flood of spiritual and temporal value whose effects we still feel. Naturally, Cardinal Dubois said yes to the chapel, while not understanding why Fr. Brottier should want to build a place of worship in honour of Thérèse! No matter.

8 December 1923

Fr. Brottier did not let the grass grow under his feet. A week after his visit to the cardinal, the weekly paper published

by the orphans of Auteuil, *La France Illustrée*, launched the first appeal for funds. Within a matter of days the plan met opposition, but heaven visibly intervened to confirm Fr. Brottier in his choice of title, Thérèse. He met M. Castel, who used supply coal to Auteuil; this gentleman was the brother of Sr. Mary of the Trinity, the last novice of Thérèse in the Lisieux Carmel. Fr. Brottier was thrilled to learn that Thérèse in her lifetime had known and loved the children of Auteuil and had prayed for the organization. M. Castel's witness was a trump-card that he used constantly to convince the Friends of Thérèse to build the chapel. The prioress of Carmel allowed Sr. Mary of the Trinity to be godmother of the Auteuil organization. Auteuil was under way. From now on, Thérèse was intimately associated with it and the hand of God was on it. Fr. Brottier's trust, simultaneously blind and lucid, began to flatten mountains. To his virtues were added great human qualities. An indefatigable worker despite atrocious and persistent headaches, a proven organizer, a man of personal relationships endowed with a fertile imagination, he undertook disconcerting enterprises in various domains, even scandalizing some of his friends. Like all who live the gospel to the letter, he was embarrassing! "Ask and you will receive". He took Christ's word to heart and staked all on providence, which accommodated itself to his faith.

Fr. Brottier worked for twelve years at Auteuil, from 1923 to his death in 1936. He had two capital preoccupations, closely linked: 1) to save the poorest and most disadvantaged children; 2) to associate Thérèse of Lisieux with his mission and thereby make known her message of God's love. When he had arrived, the organization was in difficulty. Staff and children were disgruntled and debts were huge. He began by repairing the plumbing, increasing salaries, improving living conditions and generally raising morale. He did not succeed all at once. His council did not understand why, a fortnight after arriving, he should open a subscription campaign, not as a stop-gap but to build a chapel, even if it was in honour of Thérèse — still only beatified, incidentally. "Love tends to be foolish"!

Outside the organization, and even within the Holy Ghost Congregation, his methods appeared irrational, bewildering, bordering on the wrong. They shocked some people. "You would be better employed putting up dormitories and work-

shops rather than a chapel". This was not Fr. Brottier's logic; the heavenly treasurer is different from earthly ones! The appeals for the chapel brought in an avalanche of gifts. A magnificent chain of friendship started that would enable the Auteuil organization to develop prodigiously and save a multitude of children, a chain whose links go on multiplying. The chapel became a source of graces, a spiritual centre for anguished supplications and cries of distress as well as for messages of love and thanksgiving. Then he built reception rooms and professional areas, but the house at 40 Rue La Fontaine did not suffice. He opened houses throughout the country and instituted the association, "Orphans of France", whereby country households took hundreds of children into a family atmosphere to learn a farming trade. For twelve years of frenzied activity he struggled against the encroaches of misery. He kept the Friends of Auteuil informed about his concerns and plans, reminding them that Little Thérèse was involved in his undertakings for the poor. He wrote thousands and thousands of letters that all demonstrated his love of God and his deprived people. It has been said that he was a businessman. True, but his was the "business of providence", he was "heaven's businessman". But his successes never went to his head. His fervent life of prayer, sustained in permanent converse with God, kept him humble and self-forgetful; that was his "success".

The doctors are trying to find the cause of my sickness. If they knew all the misery that knocks on my door and my powerlessness to deal with it, they would know what is breaking me today.

This was one of his last statements. He had doubled the intake of children in twelve years and was still not satisfied. He fell sick on 2 February 1936, the very day of the consecration of the cathedral at Dakar. He died on the 28th. 15,000 people filed past his remains before the funeral service conducted by Cardinal Verdier.

Fr. Brottier's work did not finish with his life, but developed in unlikely ways. Fr. Marc Duval, his second successor, opened sixteen houses! Today the Auteuil organization numbers 3,400 children and youths. The disturbing question is, are we faithful to it all? Little Thérèse and Fr. Brottier gave the bad habit of miracles to those working at Auteuil! A daily miracle is hard to manage, yet it happens. The twenty-five

houses of Auteuil train 3,400 boys in trades. There are 1,300 men and women to educate them, as well as the inevitable administration. 60% of the budget is always in doubt. Auteuil is a challenge to the most elementary rules of management.

Why this permanent miracle, why God's solicitude for Auteuil? To show the intercessory power of Thérèse and Fr. Brottier in a mission situation, on the limits of the spiritual desert. Thérèse of Lisieux, patroness of the missions, and Daniel Brottier, missionary to the fingertips, are at home in this field of activity and know God's free gifts. They ask us to receive the poorest with open arms, the most deprived, those nobody wants. Are we fulfilling their expectations? One certitude remains. We at Auteuil know in all honesty that God's mercy is in inverse proportion to our merits.

Jean Gosseln
Director General of the Auteuil Organization
28 February 1984