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Jean P. Le Gall

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THE MAN WHOM GRACE TURNED INTO A SAINT

"It has been said that I am lucky", Fr. Brottier confided to his friend and colleague, Fr. Yves Pichon.

Yes, it is true. God has blessed me, he has given me the satisfaction of succeeding in what I undertook; but if, thanks be to God, I have been so lucky I can say with some modern writer or other that (my luck has been to rise at five every morning and retire at eleven or even midnight). My luck has been to work, to write thousands of letters, to try new initiatives, to be in the thick of things, in full tilt, availing of opportunities.

The basic image of Fr. Brottier's personality is one of exceptional richness at the service of a supernatural conviction capable of surmounting all obstacles.

A RESOLUTE SPIRIT

We are dealing with someone who was feeling anything but guilty before an immense task. He took everything seriously, dedicating himself to the limit of his powers, but with a sort of quiet strength that had its source in his psychic balance and unshakable faith in God. "Your heart is worn out", the doctors told him on his deathbed. He answered: "My job is over; God, your will be done". His resolute spirit was his strength as a young man — his missionary vocation had shown itself at twelve. It sustained him in his studies despite the precocious phenomenon of headaches. A priest who knew him when he was entering the seminary described him. "A wide-awake student, hardy, resolute, sure of himself". He went on to the senior seminary of Blois, was ordained for the diocese and received his first appointment as dean of studies in the college of Pontlevoy. He met the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny in the infirmary where his frail health made him a reg-

ular client. Conversation turned to the missions, Senegal, Guiana, the Congo. The missionary flame was ignited. At the end of August 1902, aged 26, he entered the Holy Ghost novitiate, knowing he could not prolong his family's pain at the news that he was going to the missions. His resolution was firm, even at the obvious risk of an early death.

Yet his determination was sorely tried. His family had accepted his vocation to be a diocesan priest; their son would be nearby, a certain security was guaranteed. Daniel realized the difficulty of parting and wrote about it to his future master of novices. "I never knew it was so complicated to leave the world". He had foreseen his mother's objections and prepared his answers, but his father was more categorical. "Have you thought about your health? Your broad shoulders give the impression of strength, and yet look at all the doctors we had to bring you to, the headaches since you were a child, that nothing can take away. It is folly to go out; you will get sick and have to come back. If you do go, it is against my formal will".

OVERFLOWING ZEAL

Fr. Brottier was appointed to Senegal, which at that time was reserved for the more frail; missionaries died there less quickly than in the Congo or Ubangi-Shari. Once he had arrived, his zeal knew no bounds: meetings, talks, sports, band, parish bulletin. In less than three years his bad health forced him back to France. But when he returned to Africa after a break he resumed his life of activity, sustained by a brilliant imagination and all kinds of talents. In the midst of it came the desire to be a Trappist. After a short trial he had to abandon this, even if the pull to contemplative life made itself felt from time to time later.

Between 1903 and 1911 he spent only short periods overseas. Finally the doctors decided he must stay in France. A Sister who knew him in Senegal said: "Despite his many occupations, cares and problems, he was by no means sad or morose. No, he was bright and open, with the ready word to make people laugh. Yet he suffered, God sent him trials and troubles. Like all those who want to do good, he knew the value of generosity, sacrifice and self-forgetfulness". The

missionary was back home. Known now for his many qualities, his liveliness and apostolic dynamism, he would make solid friendships like that of his bishop, Bishop Jalabert, who appreciated him. Fr. Brottier was to spend himself for Bishop Jalabert, gathering funds for the cathedral of Dakar. Other friendships among the French soldiers at St. Louis would help towards the future National Union of Ex-Servicemen, to be initiated by himself, and towards the organization of the orphan-apprentices of Auteuil. His short stay in Africa sowed rich seed that would produce a hundredfold.

THE MAN OF DANGER

For health reasons Fr. Brottier was not mobilized when the first world war broke out. But he enlisted with a group of voluntary chaplains, and went on to show courage and legendary dedication in the face of danger, giving of himself with a sort of fury. Soldiers would say to him, "Father, near you we feel sheltered; shells just go through you". We do not intend to recount this capital episode of his life in detail but only to look at the moral greatness of our confrere. Two mentions in despatches will suffice. The first is of November 1917: "Legendary chaplain of the 121st infantry regiment, for his calm and quiet bravery, his scorn of danger, his extraordinary spirit of dedication and self-sacrifice. He has spent himself in all circumstances and under the most violent bombardments to bring the comfort of his presence and needed aid to the wounded. Highly esteemed and admired by all the regiment". The second is of June 1918: "A magnificent soul in whom the soldier's ardour and the priest's dedication combine. Legendary in the regiment whose difficult moments he shares. During the attacks of June 1 and 2, 1918 at Troesnes, he went through the lines lifting, bandaging and helping the wounded, seeking them out in the front lines under the intense fire of the cannons and encouraging the soldiers. . . Exercises the greatest influence on the soldiers, whom he sustains morally in their difficult hours by his encouragement and example".

These were dreadful years, of which he would say later: "It was a hard apprenticeship; but now it is over and I am hardened to war for all time".

He did not want the bond of friendship that had grown between the soldiers to dissolve. Astonishingly bold when something seemed right to him, he did not hesitate to meet the head of government in person — a noted anti-clerical — to outline his plan on a national level: to create an association of ex-servicemen. "Your idea is excellent", said the statesman, "I fully approve and encourage you". This was the birth of the National Union of Ex-Servicemen, with the motto, "United as at the Front".

Memories of the war would follow him all his life, but the frightful situations he had met did not alter that tenderness of heart that would make him still more legendary in the service of the orphan-apprentices of Auteuil. Providentially death had spared him, but the daily deaths of others affected his character sufficiently to be able to transform a moribund house into a thriving institution.

A VALUED COUNCILLOR

It was not that Fr. Brottier had totally committed himself to activity. Twice he had felt called to be a Trappist — in Senegal in 1908 and then in France in 1912. These were signs of his passionate love for God, constantly seeking his will, a guarantee of the prudence of his actions, whether on his own behalf or for one of his many visitors. This outstanding prudence would inspire the Congregation to call him, despite his overload of work, to the post of assistant general. He did not look for it; he even sent his doctor and friend to Archbishop Le Hunsec, the superior general, to dissuade him. Back came the reply: "In appointing him to the Council the Fathers want above all to be able to benefit from his wide experience in the thorny questions that arise".

One of the remarkable instances of his supernatural prudence was the idea from the moment of his appointment — forty-eight hours after he was installed — that a new chapel should be built at Auteuil consecrated to her who was still only Blessed Thérèse of Lisieux. Wise people tried to dissuade him, some blamed him outright for big ideas. He attributed the miraculous protection of his life to her whom the English-speaking soldiers called "The Little Flower". After the war he had said to his former bishop of Dakar how sur-

prised he was to have escaped so many mortal dangers. The bishop took a picture of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus from his breviary, to which he had attached a photo of Fr. Brottier and the prayer, "Little Sister Thérèse, keep Fr. Brottier safe for me". "Every night", said the bishop, "I begged her to save you; she worked the miracle".

BOLDNESS

In building the chapel Fr. Brottier was also guaranteeing a mother for his orphans, and he launched into what all saw as an adventure. His supernatural boldness asked for signs from his protectress, visible and tangible ones. His trust in God was the support for his boldness, it would be artificial to separate them. "His life was an unending miracle", said one of his colleagues. It is a fact that while the chapel was being built, that is, 1924-5, he received daily by mail or in the offerings-box or from anonymous donors a thousand-franc note that he felt certain came from St. Thérèse. This sign urged him on. One evening about 9 p.m. he said to Fr. Yves Pichon, "I did not receive the usual money today; look in the offerings-box in the chapel, it may be there". Sure enough it was, so badly inserted in the slot that anyone could have taken it. Another evening after prayers: "I did not receive the money today; watch what happens". A lady arrived and offered him an envelope, asking for prayers for her father. It contained the thousand francs. Further anecdotes confirmed the aura of the miraculous surrounding him. Cardinal Verdier of Paris said, "Whenever I see Fr. Brottier I seem to see him in a halo of light".

A HEART OF FIRE

He looked on the chapel of St. Thérèse as the soul and focus of the Auteuil organization. It was a means at the service of the goal: to accept orphan children. This was his permanent concern. He wrote more than 180 articles in *La France Illustrée*, which was edited by himself, as many in the organization's *Newsletter*, thousands of letters — some days as many as 200 — all to defend the sacred cause, under the

triptych: Open the door to them, give them bread, give them a trade. He wrote in the *Newsletter* of January-February 1925:

«Bread for the orphans» is a father's cry who cannot make ends meet. Bread costs 1F 40. Mothers of families, you know what it costs to feed three or four mouths a day. What would it be if you multiplied by 300? Do you understand our cry of distress? Friends of Auteuil, must we stop taking in little children who will never receive their first holy communion? These unfortunate boys are deprived of family help and affection, must we leave them on the streets, leave them to vice and misery? What is given to the unfortunate on earth will be rewarded by God in heaven.

One day the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris, impressed by criticisms levelled against the advertizing used by Fr. Brottier, and worried by the very development of the house, said to him: "Father, it seems you are letting yourself be carried away. People are talking about the considerable capital you use for new buildings, and I hear reports that you keep the doors open daily to new orphans. It has dangers. I know it would be cruel to refuse the unfortunate, but I have the duty to remind you to be prudent". The conversation took place at the orphanage. Just then a poorly clad woman with emaciated face entered. "Father, I am a widow, sick and penniless. Tomorrow I go into hospital for a big operation. My twelve year old son may find himself without a family. Will you take him?" The woman looked from one priest to the other, not realizing one of them was the archbishop. "Madam", said Fr. Brottier, "it is for the cardinal, not for me, to decide your son's fate". The cardinal started, hesitated, then said, "Yes, Madam, Fr. Brottier will take your child".

When Fr. Brottier arrived on 21 November 1923 there were 170 orphan-apprentices; there were 300 in 1930, 400 in 1932, 500 in 1933, 700 in 1934 and 1000 in 1935. A year later, at his death, there were 1400. The figure kept on increasing, it is over 3,000 now, with the added complications of diverse origin and culture, due to the many races represented, from Asian refugees to the socially maladjusted; some houses also accept the mentally handicapped.

A MODERN "SAINT"

How did this growth take place? The new director in 1923 introduced himself calmly. Speaking to the staff, he declared:

This is no novice taking charge. Those who see him know that the years in Africa and in the war have put their hard mark on his appearance. But that is secondary. What only counts, dear friends, is that you find in me, as you did in the last four directors of Auteuil, good will, a great longing to be of use to you at a moment none too propitious.

Since the end of the war Fr. Brottier had been collecting money for the cathedral of Dakar. He had put his whole heart into that. Now he was offered a new appointment. That too he accepted and welcomed with the same self-dedication. He wrote:

To serve means to get outside oneself, to be one's own no more. It almost means to have no rights, only duties. It means to have no self-interest, to sacrifice everything to the general interest. It is to think, will and act for the good of others. It is to live, and sometimes to die, for the well-being of all, out of love for God.

His way was to take decisions — some would call it rashness. He was convinced he was doing missionary work. St. Thérèse was committed on her part by her promise to shower roses from heaven after she died. So he gave himself over to working for the orphans, becoming attached to the boys and what families they had. His bulletin hammered home the motto, "Open the gates to them". His biographer, Fr. Pichon, said in the depositions for his beatification: "I often met him crying as he left his office at night, when he would say with sadness, See, I had to refuse a hundred more orphans today; I have nowhere to put them; isn't it dreadful?"

TIRELESS LETTER-WRITER

St. Thérèse's shower of roses did not turn sufficiently into a flood of banknotes, despite Fr. Brottier's campaigning ge-

nus and conviction. The demand exceeded the supply. Thousands of letters, articles in *La France Illustrée* and the organization's *Newsletter*, lavish ceremonies in honour of St. Thérèse at which tens of thousands of Parisians came to pray under the leadership of famous bishops — all human means were pressed into the service of the organization that had the triple goal of making good Christians, good workers and good citizens. On occasion the spiritual state of his charges disturbed him. He opened his heart to his chaplains: "When we examine the results so far we must admit they are modest enough; religiously, we are not raising our children high". The chaplains countered that levels were low everywhere in such institutions, and that the handicap of orphans from poor families added complications. For material development he obtained the collaboration of an engineer of the polytechnic school to modernize the workshops, multiply the trades, improve the quality of teaching techniques and professional training. The organization has kept up its tradition and reputation in industrial circles ever since. At his death the foundations were well laid and Auteuil had become known. As he said himself: "I could disappear any day. The future can be faced calmly, for I have created around our orphans a network of friendships and dedication that I consider indestructible".

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These few characteristics, taken basically from Fr. Pichon's *Life of Fr. Brottier*, will help to sketch the moral portrait of our confrere. What must be borne in mind is that the mainspring of his life was nothing other than complete trust in God and in the organization's protectress, St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus. Union with God is the soul of the apostolate.

Jean P. Le Gall, C.S.Sp.
Former Director General of the Auteuil Organization