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## The Heart of Auteuil

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## THE HEART OF AUTEUIL

Our superior general, Fr. Frans Timmermans, invited me to come and work at Auteuil with Mr. Jean Gosselin, the director general. I remember the day easily, 11 February 1976, as St. Bernadette Soubirous is one of my favourite Saints; like many of our young people at Auteuil, Bernadette was marked by difficulties in her family. Besides, two months earlier, I had attended a vocations meeting at Nevers. Someone had persuaded me to go and pray before St. Bernadette's shrine, a thing not greatly to my taste. But God was waiting to give me a friend in the communion of Saints. Before that emaciated corpse I was overcome. Yes, Bernadette was indeed the sister of the children we take in. It was no chance that her physique was poor and that she died a martyr to asthma. God had loved her first, for he exalts the humble. One of the aspects of Auteuil became clear for the first time: through Fr. Roussel's and Fr. Brottier's work God was crying out to the world of today that he loves the poor, the most abandoned, the disinherited. How otherwise account for the unfailing help God gives it?

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I soon discovered other aspects I had known only superficially before. Although I had lived eight years at Château des Vaux, our largest house, where I had looked after a missionary group, I knew nothing of Auteuil's finances. I was flabbergasted. How could the treasurer sleep at all? Only 40% of our needed resources were assured for the upkeep of our twenty-five houses, to feed, warm, train 3,400 young people and pay 1,300 people in their service. We had no capital. The Lord had to send us 60% of our expenses daily. Yet daily, monthly, yearly, our expenses were always covered, including the unforeseen and unforeseeable investments like burst boilers or written-off cars. There are plenty of unforeseen factors in twenty-five houses of youngsters! I recalled an

event from childhood. During a retreat I read the life of Fr. Cottolengo of Turin and was amazed at this priest who counted on God alone to feed his 2,000 people in hospitals. One unforgettable detail for me at the age of twelve was that each night he would open his window and empty out his money-drawer onto the street, so as not to be lacking in trust in him who feeds the birds of the air! But here in front of my eyes was the same act of providence towards the poorest: our 3,000 boys fed, instructed, trained, thanks to the gifts of our friends in heaven and on earth. We did not empty the cash-box out the window but, without capital, always unsure for tomorrow, like men of little faith, as Jesus would say, we saw money coming in, just enough to pay debts and calm the storms of our debtors.

I admit the first months intrigued me. Fr. Brottier was famous throughout France but I did not see God helping us that much. Yet, already at Château des Vaux, God had been showing me the light. Fr. Lucien Rozo, former provincial of France, became religious superior at Auteuil, then went to live at 40 Rue La Fontaine, where he replied to the letters. He read out some for me: moving, full of faith, from people in dire straits, asking Fr. Brottier's and St. Thérèse's help. I quoted them regularly in our missionary group, to help us to pray for the Friends of Auteuil. But now I was reading the incoming mail myself, getting to know Auteuil in the raw. Thérèse of Lisieux, whom Fr. Brottier had chosen as patron of his orphans in November 1923, showed up everywhere. All the letters, sometimes *hundreds*, spoke of her. People invoked her, recommended various intentions, thanked her. Her name and Fr. Brottier's were linked as colleagues to solicit impossible requests from heaven.

From the start Fr. Brottier had thought only of Thérèse. Faced with the task of re-launching Fr. Roussel's great work, he had requested the children's prayers for nine days for an unnamed favour. When you come to Auteuil, look at the large stained-glass window in the transept over our Lady's altar, right beside his grave. The inscription reads: "1 December 1923 his Eminence Cardinal Dubois, Archbishop of Paris, gave permission for the building of this sanctuary dedicated to St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus". In other words, nine days after arriving in Auteuil, Fr. Brottier had his permission to build the first *chapel* in Christendom *dedicated* to St. Thérèse

of Lisieux, and had taken this Saint as patron of his orphans. I love his reply to the cardinal, who thought a young girl was not the best patron for his urchins. "Maybe my boys will not think about her but she will think about them!" From that on he dedicated himself to Thérèse's cause, making her known and loved, first by the people of Paris and then by all of France. He wrote in the editorial of *La France Illustrée*, 6 November 1926:

**In the right transept of our chapel, artists have reproduced a moment of history in stained glass. On 1 December 1923 the director of the Auteuil organization obtained permission from his Eminence, Cardinal Dubois, to build the chapel and consecrate it to St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus. The archbishop is shown kneeling, holding in his hands the model of Thérèse's chapel, surrounded by young first communicants and the teacher who prepared them; then Fr. Roussel, humbly kneeling behind the cardinal, then Canons Fontaine, Blétit and Muffat, and the present director behind them. Our Lady of First Communion is seated, the Child Jesus on her knees stretching out his hands towards the communicants to receive their homage. A flight of angels around and above the monstrance shining in golden light recalls that all these religious gestures move towards the sacred Host and that Thérèse will use this sanctuary, as she wrote herself, to make Love loved.**

The weekly *La France Illustrée* was launched by Fr. Roussel in 1874 to advertize the Auteuil organization. Fr. Brottier began using it to make Thérèse known. Between 1 December 1923 and 29 October 1927 all his editorials without exception spoke of her and her sanctuary. He kept the subscribers on their toes with graphs of subscriptions, lists to be filled, weekly information on the state of the work. The editorial of 6 July 1924 announced the laying of the first stone, 6 September the opening of the foundations, 29 September the plan of the new basilica. He showed contagious enthusiasm for Thérèse. It can be said today, re-reading the lists of subscriptions, that he had mobilized the whole of France to offer the young Carmelite of Lisieux her sanctuary in Paris. On 25 October he spoke of his real reason for the choice — it was

that he was miraculously preserved during the four years of the great war, 1914-1918, by Thérèse. This chapel of thanksgiving would be the sign and instrument of a genuine Christian training, the first and essential goal of Fr. Roussel.

But Fr. Brottier would also make Thérèse known through his correspondence. He replied to thousands of letters of benefactors and created a goodwill network to sustain the organization. His pen has been preserved. I have often looked at it. The thought that he would write 100 letters a day makes my fingers tingle on my own fountain-pen. It was a feat, and I understand why today correspondents send me his handwriting, letters addressed to them, like one recently from the altar-boy of 1908 at St. Louis in Senegal, or letters addressed to parents and grandparents of my correspondents.

The whole Auteuil organization resembles an iceberg. The visible part is twenty-five houses, 3,500 young people and 1,300 adults serving them. The invisible part is the thousands of people out there who are friends of Thérèse and Fr. Brottier. In the communion of Saints all these friends constitute a vast power of prayer and intercession that explains the unlikely. Thanks to them, the needed money comes to us daily. And there are other results more important for the survival of the spiritual work of Fr. Roussel and Fr. Brottier. For example, as the administration of houses passed into lay hands there was danger that the work might lose its primary meaning, but that did not happen. Providence saw to it that each time men and women were chosen who kept the founders' spirit, without cleaving to sterile traditions. Again, the temptation was strong to take in only good students, orderly quiet boys with good connections; on the contrary, influenced by the Holy Spirit, the directors continue to receive the poorest.

The main house, at 40 Rue La Fontaine, Paris, sheltered 340 young boys of thirty-two different nationalities during 1982-83! The director knows this is too many, it is unreasonable, but, face to face with certain situations, his heart accords what his reason refuses! For example, two youngsters of fourteen and fifteen arrived, one black and one white, who had simply read Fr. Brottier's life and seen the Auteuil address. Another boy just brought his brother to the gate and presented him. Another fourteen-year old orphan was taken

by friends to Paris and placed into Auteuil; tears first, then calm and settling down. That is Auteuil today.

A moot point in our liberal world is how to present the faith to the young people we receive. I know our poverty in this area, and far be it from me to give rise to false optimism! God clearly sends us many men and women of solid and contagious faith who are examples to the young. It is humble work. We remember the grain growing of itself once God has sown it with our good-will, and we remember the darnel growing with the wheat. We rush to pull out the darnel and are upset by the Lord's patience and tolerance. We would only destroy the garden.

I once spent a while with a group of eight adults on the Island of Reunion, a group called "Awakening the Faith". They speak to young people about religion. Veronica opened the meeting with a meditation on our Lady's Assumption for 15 August.

"Mary lived in a simple house at Nazareth. With her husband she recited the words every morning: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and you shall love your neighbour as yourself for love of God". Then she set to the day's work, for her husband was a poor workman, joiner, wheelwright, carpenter as needs were. Mary did the household jobs, tired at the end of the day. She had gathered diamonds where others gather pebbles (valueless acts). Her judgement was a triumph, the crowning of a meritorious life".

Obviously Veronica's own spiritual life enabled her to help on the grain and stifle the darnel. The great prayers of our friends, as they come across in the letters to Auteuil, obtain the same for us. This is Auteuil's heart and strength.

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It remains for me to give some extracts from these letters, one better than the other. In 1976, 1,000 letters a day were arriving, and instead of decreasing this number has increased to 2,000 a day and sometimes more. Nothing explains Auteuil except God's mercy to the most unfortunate, the spiritually deprived, that mercy that St. Thérèse of Lisieux made the centre of her message. The letters present a striking ana-

logy to the psalms, as I often realize when saying the liturgy of the hours. The psalms are cries of the Holy Spirit, who used the poor of Israel as harps, singing or sighing according as those people were filled with pain, anguish, or joy, hope and love. Only God could inspire them, rough prayers, cries of people facing the worst: suffering, illness, death. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" was Jesus' cry from the cross. We find similarities in the letters to Auteuil, psalms of the twentieth century.

\* \* \*

Psalm 68: Worn out with calling, my throat is hoarse; my eyes are strained, looking for my God.

This is a cry of desperation. My son, divorced, has taken to drink and lost his job. Pray that Fr. Brottier and St. Thérèse will give him the will to live and the faith to find a more balanced life.

\* \* \*

Psalm 110: I give thanks to Yahweh with all my heart. The works of Yahweh are sublime, those who delight in them are right to fix their eyes on them.

Send me a picture of Fr. Brottier. I was brought up to love that holy man. I am twenty-seven, I have a good job and I say that without people like you life would lose a fundamental dimension.

\* \* \*

Psalm 90: I rescue all who cling to me, I protect whoever knows my name, I answer everyone who invokes me, I am with them when they are in trouble.

A road accident at nineteen had made me a difficult person. My family thought I would never get out of the nightmare. I wanted to die. Then my mother asked you there to pray for me. When the novena started I felt inexplicably better. At twenty I am out of the tunnel, thanks to Fr. Brottier and St. Thérèse, and glad to be alive. Thank you.

\* \* \*

Psalm 83: God is battlement and shield. Yahweh withholds nothing good from those who walk without blame.

After a long illness, two years of agony and terrible suffering, my dear husband has died. He never rebelled or despaired. He kept the faith and called on Fr. Brottier and St. Thérèse. He offered his sufferings for others. I will always have full trust in Fr. Brottier.

\* \* \*

Psalm 39: I waited and waited for Yahweh, now at last he has stooped to me and heard my cry for help.

Traumatically affected by her father's second marriage Brigitte fled to the West Indies. For thirteen years I prayed to Fr. Brottier every day for her to come back. She returned on 24 September, in good form and happy to find her family again. Thank you, Fr. Brottier.

\* \* \*

Psalm 33: They cry for help and Yahweh hears and rescues them from all their troubles.

Fr. Brottier helped my seventeen-year old son to die well, worthily, saintly. This is my greatest consolation in my sorrow.

\* \* \*

Psalm 69: To me, poor wretch, come quickly, God! My helper, my saviour, Yahweh, come without delay!

My daughter committed suicide twelve years ago. Now my grown son is depressed. My husband has left me. I am alone with my pain. Do you understand my misery? I feel stupefied. I expect the worst, but I do not know how. Fr. Brottier, help me, I beg you!



Here in Auteuil itself we meet hard things too. One of our students was killed on Holy Thursday 1983 at fifteen and a half while he was robbing a shop. He had been six months in one of our houses, yet we could not prevent him from violence and death. His family belonged to that fourth world among the high-rise flats, under their shadow. Two million people live like that among us, the fourth world; they eat a quarter of what we do, they live four in a room if not in a bed. Their violence is born of trying to be like us. The Mass for Raymond was moving. All the boys were attentive and quiet, even if the mystery of Christ was partly hidden from them. After the Mass a fifteen-year old Algerian gave me a rose from the altar; he had been Raymond's best friend.



I will finish on an optimistic note about grace bearing fruit. One of our former students is regularly in prison. He was condemned for a serious crime on 15 December 1981. Through a priest, God touched his heart and he was converted. He wrote:

"A choir came to sing at the prison on Christmas Day. I could not see but only hear them. I was deeply moved, sad and happy at the same time. I was transferred to another prison and condemned to six years of hard labour and solitude. In my cell I had holy pictures of Christ, of Fr. Brottier and of Fr. C. I went to bed and said the beads the chaplain had given me, so as not to despair. The six years do not frighten me any more, the love of Christ is with me". On the last Sunday of September 1983 this young man was baptized in the chapel of his former home of Auteuil, after two years of preparation. His joy and happiness were transparent, fruit of all the prayers offered for Auteuil. Nothing is stronger than prayer.

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