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BLESSED DANIEL BROTTIER –A BORN EDUCATOR

François Nicolas, C.S.Šp.

François Nicolas, a Spiritan from the French Province, has given many years of service to the Congregation in a leadership capacity and in the area of formation. Ordained in 1959, he taught Philosophy at the Spiritan seminary in Mortain, France, and was director of the senior seminary at St. Ilan before serving as Vice Provincial of his Province from 1979-1986. A member of the Spiritan General Council in Rome from 1986-1992, he later became a director of the Auteuil Foundation at its headquarters in Paris. A former director of the journal *Spiritus* and co-editor of *Synopse des Deux Règles de Libermann* (30 rue Lhomond, Paris, 1968), he is currently superior of the Spiritan community at Marseille.

(Translation: Vincent O’Toole,
C.S.Sp.)

*You are a born educator
– your place is among
children.*

THE EDUCATIONAL WORK OF FR. ROUSSEL

Fr. Daniel Brottier is looked on as the second founder of the Work for Apprenticed Orphans at Auteuil (*l’Œuvre des Orphelins Apprentis d’Auteuil*). This foundation, which had been started by Fr. Roussel on March 19th, 1866, soon gained an unparalleled reputation for helping poor and orphaned children, victims of the industrial revolution and its adverse effects on family life. Fr. Roussel had already approached the Spiritans to take over the work in 1876, and he put the same request to Don Bosco, the founder of the Salesians, two years later. Finally, it was the Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul¹ who took over responsibility for the work from 1895 to 1923.

After the 1914-18 war, many other children in distress were in need of care. But the foundation of Auteuil had run into several difficulties, so the Archbishop of Paris, Mgr. Dubois, turned again to the Spiritans to ask for help. This was principally because of the reputation of the Spiritans in the field of education. The successors of Claude Poullart des Places were well known as the founders of schools and seminaries. In opening an orphanage at Noyon in 1846, Fr. Libermann had a future trade school in mind. In 1855, the Congregation took charge of an agricultural center for orphans at Saint Ilan and, in 1857, it opened an agricultural camp for poor children at Saint Michel en Priziac (Langonnet).²

In 1876, Fr. Le Vasseur wrote to Fr. Roussel on behalf of the Superior General, Fr. Schwindenhammer, that his work was “*very fine and clearly in conformity with the ends of our Congregation.*”³ One reason why Mgr. Le Roy finally agreed to accept the proposal of the Archbishop was that his missionary congregation would be able to make good use of the fine printing press already established at Auteuil.⁴

A CHARISMATIC EDUCATOR

When he took over the direction of Auteuil, Fr. Brottier was 47 years old and he had the reputation of a great educator and organizer. As a young priest of the diocese of Blois, his Bishop, Mgr. Laborde, had appointed him in 1899 to the post of teacher-supervisor at the College of Pontlevoy, saying, “*You are a born educator – your place is among children.*”⁵

During the process of beatification, one of his former students, Mr. André Duchâteau, testified that “*Fr. Brottier for us was unforgettable...He impressed everybody, without exception, with*

his energy and outstanding personality. He joined in our games and walks and he knew how to inspire and guide us with his wonderful dynamism and imagination."⁶ These words underline some of the basic qualities of Fr. Brottier as a teacher.

In 1903, Daniel Brottier, now a Spiritan, was appointed to Saint Louis in Senegal, where he had to operate within the context of the French anti-religious laws of the time. Christian teachers had been expelled, so the bishop asked him to develop new ways of reaching out to young people. Amongst his initiatives were the setting up of a youth club called "*Joan of Arc*" and a brass band called "*La Faidherbe*," both of which accepted young people from any religion or social background. But he also showed his concern for adults with a group known as "*The Catholic Circle*" and a review entitled "*The Echo of Saint Louis*."⁷

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As soon as he arrived in Senegal, Fr. Brottier appreciated the growing importance of the media, so he made sure that the young felt at ease with the culture and concerns of their own time. He wrote in the *Echo of Saint Louis*: "*When I see young adults, around 25-30 years of age, making heroic efforts to learn the alphabet, far from laughing at them, I am full of admiration: they understand the times in which they live.*"⁸ He also said in the same review: "*At the Catholic Circle, you can find a real reading-room, where reviews for the more learned share the same shelves with books for children.*"⁹ Finally, Brottier developed the interest of young people in gramophone records, photography, and cinema; he started the "*Cinerama of Saint Louis*" and, later on, opened up at Auteuil one of the first parochial cinemas.¹⁰

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During the First World War, when he volunteered as a chaplain, his educational mission continued as before. In fact it reached its full maturity in his day to day companionship with so many young men who were putting their lives at risk on the front. The experience brought home to him the reality of human suffering and, at the same time, the plight of children left orphaned by the war. Expressions like the following recur frequently in his daily talks and his correspondence with the children of Auteuil who had been sent to the countryside: "*Causes which progress are those for which one is prepared to die*"; "*your ideal must be to become a man*"; "*a man is one who knows what he wants and achieves it whatever the cost*"; "*hard struggles affect the soul and temper it like steel*"; "*the less one is concerned with oneself, the greater one's life becomes*"; "*to serve is to no longer be oneself: it is self-sacrifice for the common good.*"

BROTTIER AT AUTEUIL

When Mgr. Le Roy asked Daniel Brottier to take over the running

of the orphanage at Auteuil, he told him, *“I think you are the man for the job,”*¹¹ a phrase that echoes what his bishop had said at the start of his educational ministry twenty-five years previously.

So what were the principal elements of his vision for education?

His first step was to create an extensive network of benefactors around the work.

Necessity of a stable framework: When he took on responsibility for this fragmented work, Fr. Brottier realized that the primary need of these children, who had been deprived of their natural support, was security and stability in their educational journey. He resolved to give them that personal identity that they would normally have acquired in a family atmosphere – an identity which would root them in a past, as well as a future. His first step was to create an extensive network of benefactors around the work. In addition to supporting the work, these people would also effectively supervise and sustain the whole educational system through their ongoing correspondence. Fr. Roussel had already set up a large network of benefactors, due particularly to the newspaper *“La France Illustrée,”* edited and printed by the students themselves. Fr. Brottier greatly extended this set of connections to cover the whole of France, thanks to his communication skills and his reputation both in the Church and among the veterans of the war,¹² and to links he had already established with the huge number of benefactors who had contributed to the building of the cathedral at Dakar.

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The future of the educational project was further secured by Fr. Brottier in 1929, when he sought and successfully obtained from the State recognition of his work as *“a foundation of public utility.”* At that time, it was a minor miracle that a Church project should receive such praise from the government! In other words, it was the whole society as a family that was being invited to support this work for young people in difficulty. Henceforth, it was to be known as *“The Foundation for Apprenticed Orphans at Auteuil.”*

Today, it is recognized that this network of benefactors, which has been a constant part of the history of Auteuil and often passes from one generation to the next, is still one of the secrets of its success: *“To be a boarder in a house of Auteuil does not just mean that they are the recipients of knowledge and careful formation; they become part of a dream, a collective symbol. Auteuil respects the freedom of thought and the convictions of each person. But, at the same time, it is the guarantor of an inheritance passed on to each one, thus allowing them to enter into a prestigious history and giving them ancestors, symbolic fathers of whom they have reason to be proud.”*¹³

For Daniel Brottier, the patronage of Saint Theresa of Lisieux, to whom he consecrated the entire work as soon as he arrived at

Auteuil, was one of the foundation stones on which its stability depended. His first step was to build a sanctuary to Saint Theresa, a decision that was much criticized at first by his co-workers because of the financial fragility of the work. But eventually this bold initiative was instrumental in bringing a flood of benefactors to support the foundation at Auteuil. Brottier even had posters about Saint Theresa placed in the Paris underground. By choosing Theresa as a patron and helper, he wanted to introduce a female presence into the lives of the orphans and give them the example of a spirituality that was simple and accessible to all.

Brottier was always convinced that Theresa had protected him in a special way throughout the war. During her life, Theresa had actually followed the early development of the work at Auteuil through one of her novices in Carmel, whose father, Monsieur Castel, had worked with Fr. Roussel.

Importance of quality educators and teamwork: From the moment of his arrival at Auteuil, Fr. Brottier was very careful to recruit only qualified people and he did everything to develop their skills and mould them into a genuine team.¹⁴

There was no doubt that he was the leader, but always in an atmosphere of genuine friendship: “*Authentic leadership can only exist with the help of intelligent and totally committed collaborators.*” Monsieur David, the chief supervisor, who was already there before he arrived, assisted him with the devotion of somebody whose life was totally given to God and to the young people. Brottier himself testified that he was “*an extraordinary man who was never put out, but who put himself out continually for others.*” The strength of any educational work lies in unassuming people who remain in the background yet make sure that everything is going well by their generosity of spirit. Because of them, many a crisis is avoided and the young people sense an atmosphere of total security.

Fr. Brottier also relied heavily on Monsieur Mouillier, a highly educated man and a convert, who had become his close friend in the trenches. Mouillier devoted his whole life to Auteuil, modernizing the workshops and the system of formation. The entire team shared the goal of a rounded education, built on a combination of a professional, human, and spiritual formation for the young people. The workers who had been trained at Auteuil soon built up the reputation of being amongst best available in Paris. The fact that the number of apprentices rose from 140 to 1,500 in his first 13 years testified to the quality of the formation given at Auteuil. Today, they number around 10,000. Monsieur Mouillier developed other foundations at Vésinet, Saintry, and

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Priziac. The latter, which was confided to the care of Fr. Rigault, had been a former educational establishment of the Spiritans.

Brottier had arrived at Auteuil with another Spiritan, Fr. Yves Pichon, who shared the same educational vision as himself and was in daily contact with the young people. He subsequently wrote the first biography of Fr. Brottier. There were also some diocesan priests, like Fr. Despons, who took charge of the Young Christian Workers, the aim of which was to make them into witnesses to the faith in their own milieu. Fr. Durand was the head of the new house at Malepeyre, supported and encouraged by a regular correspondence with Brottier himself. Fr. Rigault was the first of a long line of Spiritan directors and chaplains at Priziac who have had a profound influence on the foundation of Auteuil up to our own day.

At that time, the profession of educator did not yet exist; the real educators were in fact the “masters of the workshops,” who around the machines taught the young people life skills in addition to their trade. Fr. Brottier avoided any interference in the running of a workshop or during the periods of recreation so as not to obstruct the work of others. But he was still the boss, present to all and recognized by all. He liked to say, *“I know everything that is going on.”*

I know everything that is going on.

It was he who had the final say in the most delicate matters, for example, deciding whom to admit and when to send away a young person who was a danger to the whole group. He agonized over the fact that he could not accept all the requests for admission; if he had to dismiss somebody, he took care to ensure they could be accepted elsewhere. The first article of the statutes of the foundation, even today, stresses the duty to keep in touch with past students *“for the rest of their lives,”* including those who have been expelled. One of the essential dimensions of education is to guarantee a real support to each individual, however difficult it might be.

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Building self-respect: The life of a young person sent to an orphanage 50 years ago left much to be desired. Daniel Brottier insisted that each child should feel welcome at Auteuil and be treated like all the others. He asked for the uniform to be abolished, apart from the clothes for manual work and sport. He believed that *“a child who is clean and well dressed will have much greater self-esteem and this in turn will help him to take pride in his work.”*¹⁵ The general conditions of hygiene followed the same lines, as can be seen from the buildings put up by Brottier, with large windows and well equipped showers. One past pupil wrote: *“Before I arrived at Auteuil, I had always been called by a number;*

*Fr. Brottier called me
John.*

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*Fr. Brottier called me John.*¹⁶ Geneviève Beslier, an historian of Auteuil, records that a child from the 16th arrondissement (a well-to-do quarter of Paris) once announced that he would prefer to go to school at Auteuil!¹⁷

This same pedagogical approach underlay all his initiatives. Writing about his review “*L’Ami des Jeunes*,” he said: “*This review, unlike many others designed for children, refuses to treat them as little idiots who have to be amused at all costs. It aims to elevate the character of the child, to entertain him, and make him laugh – but it also sets out to instruct him, to make him manly, and to improve him.*”¹⁸

At that time, only boys were accepted at Auteuil. But Fr. Brottier realized the importance of having a feminine influence about the place. This was the role of the religious sisters. While looking after the children’s clothes and the infirmary, they had plenty of opportunities to listen to their problems and to encourage them in different aspects of their everyday lives.

Personal accompaniment: The gift of a good educator is to be able to know each child personally – not just by what he does but by what he is. The young person has to be guided to recognize and develop his human and spiritual capabilities. In this context, Fr. Brottier summed up his own role as follows: “*The children must feel that I know what they are doing and that I am following their progress with genuine affection.*” In this way, they will be able to accept acts of authority when they are considered necessary.

In several ways, Fr. Brottier showed himself to be an exceptional companion to the young people in his care. First of all, his very presence was an education in itself, even if he said nothing. His piercing eyes, which seemed to be able to penetrate into the hearts of others, was sometimes overawing for the children. Even recently, a young woman from Auteuil made allusion to this: “*When I pass in front of his portrait, his look still lifts me up if things are not going too well; it calms me if I am feeling anxious.*” Some of the young people used to go to his office when they felt discouraged. He let them sit there while he continued his correspondence and they inevitably left feeling much better.

In his letters, he showed himself to be a faithful guide, helping each one along the road of life. He had founded a “Center in the Countryside,”¹⁹ where hundreds of young people were able to learn agricultural skills. They were placed with local farmers, but Brottier insisted they would not just be regarded as cheap labor, with no future. He saw to it that they were properly paid. A part of the salary was set aside for the future so that they could eventually set themselves up. The receiving families were

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carefully chosen and the parish priest and mayor of the village were asked to send in regular progress reports. But the children continued to be looked on as members of the Auteuil family. So even though he was snowed under with correspondence, Fr. Brottier wrote regularly to each one, giving the necessary advice and encouragement. Seeing himself as their father, he was anxious that they should progress simultaneously in their trade and in their Christian life.

Often, in the past, education concentrated on control and punishment, with the idea that the child needed, above all, to be corrected or reformed. Today, the ideal is to create trust, an approach especially developed and exemplified by Don Bosco and the Salesians. This “trust” is not to be confused with certain naïve theories of the nineteenth century (Jean-Jacques Rousseau), nor with the more recent crises of authority. In our contemporary society, greatly marked as it is by the frequent absence of a real father, good education means finding teachers who know how to combine firmness, goodness, and closeness to children with a respect for their personal freedom. Daniel Brottier offered an outstanding example of this kind of approach, showing the young people that he was their father in every sense.

In this way, Fr. Brottier was doing no more than living out his Spiritan vocation. Is it not the role of a missionary to assist at the birth and the growth of peoples and communities, guiding them and respecting their freedom until such time as they will take charge of their own destiny? It is a human adventure, but also an adventure of faith. This is how thousands of young people came to know and understand themselves with the help of Fr. Brottier and the other Spiritans and lay people who succeeded him, fully committed to this deeply paternal style of education.

Footnotes

¹ This congregation, founded in 1844 by a layman, Jean Léon Le Prevost, was the congregation to which Fr. Roussel originally belonged. The Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul led the work indirectly after the passing of the law on associations in 1901 and the law separating Church and State in 1905.

² Cf. R. Piacentini, *Chronique de Saint Michel en Priziac, 1856-1956*, Priziac: Orphelinat de Saint Michel, 1956.

³ Archives of Auteuil (in safe).

⁴ Archives of Auteuil. BII, 27.

⁵ A. Grach, *Le Bienheureux Père Daniel Brottier*, Paris: Karthala, 2006, p. 35.

⁶ Archives of Auteuil. Cause for Beatification.

⁷ Fr. Brottier is also remembered in Senegal for his work for the construction of the cathedral in Dakar, the so-called “Souvenir Africain.”

⁸ *Echo de Saint Louis*, August, 1908.

⁹ *Echo de Saint Louis*, September, 1909.

¹⁰ Grach, op.cit., page 161.

¹¹ Grach, op.cit., page 120.

¹² Together with President Clémenceau, Fr. Brottier had founded the National Union of War Veterans.

¹³ M. Gardet et A. Vilbrod, *Les Orphelins Apprentis d'Auteuil : Histoire d'une Œuvre*, Paris : Belin, 2000, p.277.

¹⁴ Grach, op cit.,pp.177-180.

¹⁵ Grach, op.cit., p.138.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.138.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.139.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.156.

¹⁹ “Foyer à la Campagne.”