

# 'TOTTERIDGE' 1967-1972

## RECOLLECTIONS OF AN APPRENTICE

### FOUR DECADES DOWN THE ROAD

|   |
|---|
| <b>PART I. September 1967 to June 1968: A TIME FOR PLANTING</b> |
|---|

St Edward's College was fully functioning as a scholasticate when I joined the staff, in September 1967. I was thirty years of age, ready to jump into a five-year period of apprenticeship in the trade of education, in a fast changing world. My first three years of ministry had been spent in Bukoba, Tanzania, teaching in the newly founded Major Seminary of Ntungamo. In those days, I was one of the fortunate few to have gained apostolic experience in Africa, prior to appointment to a house of formation.

#### 1. THE PLACE.

The mix of ill-assorted buildings, of all colors, sizes and shapes, grabbed my attention as Fitz's Morris turned onto the driveway. They had a touch of strangeness that defied my Canadian imagination. It did not help that it was a wet, chilly and typically drab day. On the face of it, "Totteridge", as the College was commonly referred to, had little appeal. Along the years, it had served a variety of purposes, none of which in any degree worthy of the high social status of the Lane from which it took its name. I was given accommodation on the third floor of the 'big building'. Soon I realized that what little heating reached there, was no match for the ghastly wind that freely moved across the windows. One memory my old brain has preserved of those early days on the imperial island is the sneezing and shivering caused by a cold that steadily got worse, from the day of my arrival to June of the following year. In July 1968, I feigned a lethal crisis of asthma and obtained a compassionate move to the less exposed 'new building', next to Louis Boudier's quarters.

My first impressions notwithstanding, I soon realized that Totteridge was the best suited *sitz-in-laben* for future missionaries, at a time when, both in the Church and society, old wine was giving way to a new era. Totteridge was in London, the *epicentre* of the quake that was shaking Western society and culture; and it was within easy reach of universities and Christian institutions of learning, thus facilitating the birth of a network of communications that would soon make our college a bee-hive. Besides, the 'big building' hid a trove of invaluable corners for group-rooms, and the fields provided plenty of space for sports and manual work. To someone my age, with an adventurous mind, Totteridge was like a spring-board from which to dive into a world in ebullition. It is where I spent five of the busiest and most challenging years of my life.

In the scholasticate era, the staff members were White Fathers; the syllabus was tailored for White Fathers; and the one diploma that crowned four years of diligent study was priesthood in the White Fathers.

In September 1967, Mill Hill Fathers and White Fathers began sharing staff, a first step towards a wider consortium of all missionary societies in Great Britain. There was another sign that things

were on the fast track to adjustment to the times: the presence of five Verona students, accompanied by their tutor, Fr Poda; and of as many Consolata students, one of whom Ottone Cantore, a future Scripture teacher at the MIL. They all plunged into our Totteridge community and swam with ease, for the happiness of all. – Worth making a note of, the new WF crop consisted of forward-looking young people like Don Anderson, André Filion, Peter Esmonde, Jurgen Pelz, Luigi Morell, Peter Roth, Richard Roy, Isidro Sanchez and possibly one more whose name has vanished in the London mist; all as different from one another as the Creator could possibly make them.

## II. THE STAFF.

Our rector was Patrick Fitzgerald, better known as Fitz, a cultured man best defined by vigor and enthusiasm, a master at social relations, forever on top of the world. I have remembered him as one of the best superiors I worked with, the one from whom I learned most. He was not a man to throw himself head-first into turbulent waters, yet was prepared to hear what an alternative to the present situation might hold in store for the future. Deeply respectful of the principle of *subsidiarity*, he liberally delegated responsibilities, to staff and students alike, letting you take credit for success if you got any, but leaving you to clean up the mess if that was what you had engineered.

The old man was Johny Brown, revered by generations of students for his erudition, open-mindedness, and dry English sense of humor. Events were about to reveal still another gift, the capacity to bring order and clarity to a global theological revolution at times reminiscent of the original chaos. I feel certain that, from the lodge he now occupies in the heavenly mansions, he will smile his slightly amused smile when he reads the following two lines: at the start of an era when a spot of unconventionality was becoming a sign of *being-with-it*, the students gave Fr Brown high marks for mild eccentricities that ranged from playing cricket on his own on the lawn, to learning Rahner's mother tongue by plowing through his private Mass in German.

Hans van Breugel was the Canon Lawyer, an amiable, reliable and ordered person who had the advantage of having a personality cut out for the job; he would soon become the first Dean of Studies of the MIL. He later moved to Malawi where he ended his ministry, as Regional Superior. Louis Boudier was the teacher of doctrinal theology, a task in which he excelled. To his credit, he managed to avoid losing his way into the ethereal language that is so often typical of dogmatic enunciation. In 1975, Louis died from the sequels of a motor-cycle accident he suffered in the jungle of Singida, a great loss to our Society if ever there was one. Pierre Féderlé, the most cheerful and friendly person I have ever met, was as much at ease in the class-room as he was on the rugby-pitch. He prospered in the chair of biblical studies, and was indeed a master of the trade. He also had the extra gift of spicing the most sacred of stories with humoristic anecdotes that at times must have tested the reserve of the Holy Ghost. It is known as a fact that Pierre's Guardian Angel many times jumped out of his flying Mini, and on principle kept away from the rugby mêlées that Pierre adored.

## III. THE STUDENTS.

The students? It is no exaggeration to say that we had the best of the best. If I name one, I shall have to name all. As their pictures file out of the shadows into the front-room of my ageing memory, I can't help conceding that they were all gifted, each in his own unique way, with the human and spiritual qualities you would want to find in servants of the Gospel. Inventiveness and

creativity were highly appreciated values, and they had them in sometimes disconcerting abundance.

A detail worth noting: in those days, the task of driving the community mini-busses had an aura of prestige, and only the most reliable and law-abiding gentlemen, like Dick Schopman, Henri Menoud, Piet de Bekker, Don Anderson, André Mortelmans, Pierre Béné and John Slinger, had a chance of sitting behind the driving-wheel. One night when none of those no-nonsense guys were on duty, I took it upon myself to drive a group to the Royal Albert Hall, down-town. Finding no parking-space, I drove over a side-walk and cleverly landed the bus on a parallel lane, proud of my feat in managing to occupy the free lot conveniently kept for us by Providence. My Canadian barbarism was severely *châtié* by my *Britishised* cargo, and never again was I trusted with the wheel.

Thanks to Fitz's natural talent and experience, Totteridge had *planted* a program of education based on largely autonomous teams, finely connected into the "larger community" at the level of policy, with a minimum of staff intervention on day-to-day matters. Initiative was welcome and responsibility rewarded. There was a lot of amiable interaction among the students, while occasional clashes were promptly settled through dialogue and compromise. Community happenings were always joyful events, with troubadours like Joe McManamin and Eloy Galvan galvanising the crowd with their guitars and their lively tunes. If you imagine that a group of students were unable to run its life without the benefit of a formator's presence, please move back in time to 1967 and fly up to the Shenley group's common room -- the group that welcomed me as an unobtrusive attaché, when I arrived. André Schaminée was the commander-in-chief, and Adolf Pottrick was the venerable dean. We sometimes ran out of sugar, never of order.

Most of us came from all over the world and, by common agreement, we all spoke English – or rather, as some would say, we spoke all languages but English. Not a few natives were unnerved by our insistence on putting the stress on the first syllable of Trafalgar Square; others were horrified by the continentals' tendency to pronounce names like Greenwich and Norwich the way they are written; and of course the Chancellor of the Exchequers changed his title to that of Chancellor of the X-shakers. The winning line is attributed to a most engaging Frenchman from Montpellier, Clément Forestier. On a ghastly November morning of 1970, he over-trusted the Spirit and concluded Lauds with an improvised prayer to Our Lady, begging the assembly to throw themselves into the bras of the Blessed Virgin. I still have that vision of Her hastily flying to the sisters' convent, next door. Bingo!

ALL IN ALL... that first year went by without any major disturbance that my memory considered worth being stored up. God was in good health, the news of His death still to be announced. The students' duty to study was yet to be called in question, just as the right of the staff to have a say in the running of the College. The *à-propos* of attending daily Mass was taken for granted, and no one presumed taking a night out without informing the rector.

## **PART II. September 1968 to June 1970: A TIME FOR BUILDING**

### I. "*The Times They Are a'Changin...*"

It is best to introduce this two-year period by calling to memory the many volcanoes of epochal change that were erupting all around us, and in many instances worlds away from our Totteridge

skies. Their ashes began to settle on our heads in 1968. Most important were the waves set in motion by the aggiornamento of Vatican II, then reaching Catholic shores everywhere on the planet. The survival of a teacher depended on his ability to make vital adjustments in all fields, biblical, theological, liturgical, missiological, and so forth. Old textbooks were tossed into the bins, and profs had to produce notes. Not of the same magnitude, but nonetheless highly consequential for our college, was the White Fathers' Renewal Chapter held in Rome in that same year, which Fitz attended as a delegate.

Surges of that volcanic energy came from all directions: from Northern Ireland, with Miss Devlin as the Joan of Arc of the Catholic uprisings; from South America, with the artisans of Liberation Theology facing up to the tyrants propped up by the Gringos; from the USA youth, with their revolt against the war in Vietnam; and closer to home, from the then Fr Bruce Kent and his incipient crusade against nuclear arsenals, from the Beatles' rocky revolution and the Hippies' shocking fashion. Most exciting of all: the May 1968 students' riots in Paris, from across the Channel. Most abhorrent of all: the apocalyptic disillusion of *Humanae Vitae*, from the revisionist dark corners of the Vatican,

This is how Bob Dylan expressed the spirit of it all in the title of a famous song: *The Times They Are a'Changin'*.

Then, of course, there was this disturbing trend that began to cripple the steadiest of hearts: while we were encouraging young people to proceed forward on the way in, a growing number of long ordained priests and missionaries began selecting the way out. I vividly remember a newly-arrived student telling the story of how his two previous spiritual directors, desirous to secure the graces attached to all seven sacraments, had moved out to fresher pastures... "*Would you please declare any intention of wanting to do the same, if that is what's on your mind?*" My reply must have pacified his gentle soul, for half-a-century later, he is still around, and so am I.

That's graphically what the scene was like in September 1968, when the Totteridge cast stepped up onto the platform for Act I of a world-wide recognized missionary consortium.

While taking note of the whirl-pool of commotion all around, staff and students had kept their heads; and together with their companions of other missionary societies, they would create the M.I.L.

## II. BUILDING THE M.I.L

On the whole, that creation was an engaging process of *building* a higher education project suited to a missionary world in deep transformation. It was also one that drew the best from everyone, and whose realization was felt by each and all to be a personal and communitarian success. A healthy sense of solidarity and common purpose gradually welded together missionary seminaries formerly scattered throughout Great Britain, now sharing resources for the foundation and the running of a uniquely adapted theological college, the Missionary Institute of London.

Most missionary societies chose to have their own place of residence for their candidates. The SVD's option was to stay at St Edward's for a few years. This had the side-effect of gracing us with the company of a high I.Q., high-wired agent of change, John Prior, later to become an enterprising missionary in Indonesia. There was also Vincent Fox, as gifted in mind and spirit as

he was discrete about it. Lectures and tuition were given both at St Edward's and the Mill Hill Colleges. Soon the M.I.L. had an Executive Council, the exact name of which I do not recall. Its first president was a Spiritan missionary; the Dean of Studies, our Hans van Breugel. Gerry Rathe, another one of our ranks, was chosen to be the Executive Secretary. Gerry was the God-sent manager entrusted with keeping us all on course during the first crucial years of the M.I.L.'s existence. He was a born organizer, an efficient executive, *but* not a person to be easily impressed upon to drop any of the brilliant ideas, that his brain kept generating.

A Students Body was formed, which had the temerity of electing André Schaminée as its first president. Those blessed with at least one encounter with this sturdy Dutchman will not be surprised to learn that he instantly went on from there to claim and obtain the right to be duly informed of all the deliberations of the Executive Council. Something like sitting on that Council, albeit from a safe distance. A time-bomb that by God's grace never exploded.

From September 1968 to June 1970, the destinies of St Edward's and of the M.I.L. became so deeply intermingled, that differentiating between memories of the one and memories of the other is a tricky undertaking. For instance, September 1968 saw the arrival of two new staff-members at St Edward's: one a well-known canon-lawyer with years of teaching experience at Kipalapala Major Seminary, Egon de Bekker; the other, Hans Schrenk, fresh from the Biblicum. Egon, unable to adapt to the ways of the M.I.L., would regrettably not last long on our staff; Hans became a star on Day I of his appearance in the class-room, and St Edward's remained a pied-à-terre to which he regularly returned, until it closed.

While keeping the focus on 'Totteridge', let me relate a few meaningful events that nonetheless owe some of their appeal to the M.I.L.

### III. STORIES THAT MAKE HISTORY

#### 1. THE VMM AT 'TOTTERIDGE'

The VOLUNTEER MISSIONARY MOVEMENT first sent volunteers to Uganda in 1969. My mind has failed to keep proper records of names and dates, but I seem to remember that, in early 1968, collaboration was already being planned between Edwina Gateley, the founding director of VMM, Gerry Rathe, the Secretary of the M.I.L., and Fitz, the rector of St Edward's. The first VMM training-course was held at Oak Lodge, and I think it was in the fall of 1968. For the joy of all, meals were provided at the College, in such a way that a sense of community overriding even the gender barrier animatedly developed under our roofs.

The important place of the laity in the mission of the Church, underscored by Vatican II, could not be more dramatically expressed than by this work of cooperation between two forward-looking missionary institutions, founded at about the same time. The experience was more than a local success story; it initiated a spirit of collaboration between religious and lay missionaries that would gradually produce good fruits everywhere.

#### 2. THE SHORT-LIVED OPTION FOR THE 'B.D.'

It was felt from the beginning that the Institute should provide some type of university recognition for its course of studies. In 1968, St Edward's independently took the step of sending three of its newly ordained missionaries to St Paul's, Ottawa, where they could take a Master's

degree in Theology. They were Henri Menoud, André Schaminée and Xavier Plissart. The experiment was successful, even though the stories those gentlemen are reported to have told about *living life in peace* in wild London shocked some of the locals. In 1969, the M.I.L. made arrangements for some of its students to qualify for the B.D. of London University, as external candidates. Few of our WF students applied, fewer succeeded. That initiative soon proved to be a blind alley, for it took the students away from missionary concerns.

The lasting solution had to involve a complex agreement between a university and the M.I.L. If my memory serves me well, some time in 1990 (or was it 1991?), we got good news: Louvain University would welcome the M.I.L.'s request for affiliation. It took a couple of years for a form of it to be granted, but the result was well worth the delay. In the mean-time, a new syllabus of Studies was produced, the fruit of intense teamwork by the M.I.L.'s staff.

### 3. MASTERS ON THE SCENE

Because of its missionary orientation, and a number of registered students exceeding that of any Seminary in Great Britain, the M.I.L. quickly got known as an important theological centre. A result of our good name was the willingness of the greatest scholars of the day to give their contribution in the capacity of invited guests. For instance, the course on Social Anthropology, given at St Edward's, gained the students' attention thanks to a lecture by the famed author of researches on the Nuer and the Zande, E.E. Evans Pritchard. We also had a short series of lectures by Mary Douglas, author of a *must-read* of the times, *Purity and Danger*. Being a fervent Catholic, she warned post-Vatican II enthusiasts against equating ritualism and ritual, and throwing out inherited *devotions* as un-enlightened old-women stuff. Hers was a wise warning, hardly less topical today, than it was then.

Here is a delightful story that fits in well in this context, one that signaled the kind of course things 'ritual' would follow. In 1967, few questioned the habit of wearing the *gandoura* for daily Mass. In 1968, by silent consensus, the *gandoura* was out, and in came a suitable set of shirt and trousers. In September 1969, John Gould unceremoniously walked into the chapel, dressed in jeans and a sport-shirt. That was too much for Fitz and at breakfast he exploded: "not over my dead body". Fitz is still alive, and so is the no-religious-sign-please fashion, set up on that day. It marked the entry in orbit of what I jokingly call the iconoclastic generation, still influential today.

### 4. ANGLICAN CANON MEETS CATHOLIC CARDINAL

The author of the classic *Primal Vision*, Canon John V. Taylor, future bishop of Winchester, then General Secretary of CMS, became a regular friend of our College. I remember one visit when he expressed the desire of joining us for the celebration of the always well-attended Monday evening Mass. My guardian angel, being away on heavenly duties, failed to tell me that Cardinal Heenan, animated by a lesser degree of friendliness, would also be visiting, and would be the main celebrant. Suddenly, all lights turned red, and there followed a frantic exchange of phone-calls between the archdiocesan chancellor and Fitz, ending with this compromise: Canon Taylor would sit far enough from the concelebrants for Almighty God to clearly see there was no *communio in sacris*; he would also, for fear of scandal, abstain from Holy Communion. Thanks to those clever dispositions, God's blood-pressure remained stable throughout the Eucharist, His Eminence's princely dignity was safeguarded till the *Ite missa est*, and no head was knocked off on arrival at

the sacristy. That's when my Guardian Angel jetted back to my side. He had watched the whole scene from above and found it mightily entertaining.

## 5. PRECURSORS OF JUSTICE AND PEACE

Mention must be made here of Douglas Hyde, former news editor of the communist paper *Daily Worker*, who for several years enlightened us all on the tricky workings of social change. Patiently, he revealed the intrigues taking place behind the political scenes of the world. He became a good friend of mine, no less than a revered master, and I am certain many others could say as much.

We also had heroes of anti-apartheid coming to share their experience with us. Archbishop Ambrose Reeves, expelled from South Africa after he sided with the rebellion of Sharpeville, made a lasting impression on all, because of his personal holiness and dedication to justice. Bishop Trevor Huddleston, also a hero in South African history, and a member of the Resurrection Community, *conscientised* many of us on the duty to take an active part in fighting the apartheid regime. No wonder if some of our dedicated young men like Quentin Lowe and Jurgen Pelz took up the challenge. They became regular attendees at demonstrations calling for an end to the enslavement of the Third World, and staunch opponents of structural discrimination anywhere. Jurgen, who managed to collect a B.D. while taking on all the enemies of peace and justice in the First World, *était de tous les combats*. It is to such as these two that I owe the privilege of repeatedly offering a pacifying Gospel to sections of the university elite bent on pulverizing the ignoble capitalist multinationals; guilty, however, of convincing me to join in one or two lively marches that ended with *fracas* at Trafalgar Square. "*Non, je ne regrette rien*".

Years before the art of networking became the fashionable thing to do in missionary *praxis*, our students were already masters of it. Regular friends probably counted in the hundreds; heading the list, John Feeney, our bursar, and his wife; Ted Castle, a Methodist pastor; Charlie Dawson, a police officer. You could never guess *who was coming for supper*. One evening, Cliff Richard showed up for desert, and a concert was improvised in the community rec-room. How had this rising star found his way into our midst? No one on the staff could say for sure. As always in such situations, the nebulous information was posted directly to Heaven, part of the package marked 'for God's eyes only'.

## 6. CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN THE NEWS

Then, in the spring of 1970, if I remember well, on behalf of the M.I.L., St Edward's housed the annual assembly of the Moral Theologians of Great Britain. Those were the days when the Pope, the unfortunately much maligned Paul VI, actually welcomed and even solicited the contribution of theologians, even though he did not feel constrained to follow majority views. For a full weekend, we had around the college scholars from all over the country, freely sharing on subjects which today nobody would dare to touch with a tooth brush. Among the leaders of the assembly were brilliant young theologians who have since become highly respected scholars in the field of Christian Ethics, Kevin T. Kelly, Gerard Hughes and Jack Mahoney.

## 7. *ERRARE HUMANUM EST*

With the M.I.L bravely sailing on those heavy seas, it was inevitable that contrary winds would on occasion disturb the still fragile balance of the ship. It is with sadness that I remember one such happening. To understand it, you must bear in mind that, in those years, for Enneagram No 2 characters like me and other *weaker-than-the-world* human beings, the experience of walking into a full class-room on a Monday morning did bear some resemblance to that of the gladiators of old running into a packed Coliseum on Emperor's birthday. It had become a prerogative of the students to make an appraisal of the performance of their teachers, once a semester. At the end of Fall 1970, a young SMA Father, new in the ring, was like me anxiously awaiting the day of reckoning. What would it be? Thumbs up? Thumbs down? I was given a reprieve; he was instructed to radically alter his method of teaching. Backed by a well-earned experience of survival, I advised against extreme measures; "*Be content*, I said, *with what change will keep you in the race*". He panicked, turned around and aimed at the bull's eye. By the end of the following term, his marks were down to approximately the level then enjoyed by Harold Wilson in Parliament. He got a shock, quit teaching; and a year later, the priesthood as well.

It was an unfortunate event; one, however, that stimulated reflection and positively influenced the process of education. The few hard-liners who had chosen that occasion to flex their muscles were told off by the largely wiser majority, and from then onwards the Student Body learned to put up with teachers doing their level best.

In passing, let it be said that the wider majority alluded to above, had nothing to do with the stereotyped passive mass that is content with doing what the boss asks; they were intelligent participants in the commitments undertaken by the community, gave priority to the value of prayer, and were quite capable of leading the way in coping with the ongoing waves of change. What marked them was their willingness to let the Gospel introduce them to a revolution that is called *metanoia*, one that begins at home and remains all along inspired by charity. Here is an opportunity to thank God for the wise and devoted senior students we had at St Edward's throughout those years, all of whom would eventually be entrusted with great responsibilities in the Society, John MacLean, Henri Menoud, John Slinger, André Simonart and Joseph de Bekker.

### INTERLUDE

Summer 1970 was to provide the staff of St Edward's with an event that would serve as an apt transition between, on the one hand, a period dominated by satisfaction for work well done, and on the other a season marked by worry over a number of critical choices demanding attention. Stanley Kubrick, a consummate gentleman, was shooting *Clockwork Orange*, one of the most celebrated films of all times, whose subject was the changing *mores* of the London streets. He had set his sights on our 'Totteridge' as the most suitable site for the youth penitentiary, from which to extract his terrifying leading character, *Alex*. The students were on vacation, the fee was good; why not? It would be fun to watch the crew in action anyway.

We got more than we had bargained for. Some of the film's most memorable scenes were shot away from public sight, in the rooms of the big building... a good thing we did not suspect what the crew was up to. Then, there was Malcolm McDowell, who played *Alex*. One morning when I was trying to get my thoughts together, he kept shouting the same script for hours, right next to my office. I came out, jokingly suggesting I could substitute if he should lose his voice. He

produced a Windsor uneasy smile. Little did I know that he was about to become one of the most famous actors to have made it to the podium, at a time when stars were filling the sky.

### **PART III. September 1970 - June 1971: A TIME FOR TEARING**

With the return of the students in September 1970, signs of trouble ahead soon became manifest. This time around, however, everyone sensed that a lot more was at stake than anti-conformism. We were hardly three weeks into the term that relations between staff and students, as well as within the students body itself, became *thick like glue*, to quote an expression I remember using at the time.

#### **I. THE ANTI-WHATEVER-PLATOON ON THE MOVE**

We would soon know what the dark forces were that would make our lives somewhat miserable: unpleasant overdoses of zeal for religiously-dressed political goals, mostly carried across the Channel by students-with-a-cause. In my jargon: the *anti-whatever-platoon*. That cause could be as vague as insurgency against ‘institutions’ of any sort. It could also ring the bells of class warfare, as when someone raised waves of indignation against the feudal custom of having the exploited itinerants sip their tea at the door of our lordly mansions. If the cause originated in the USA, it was likely to be energized by the youth’s anger at Richard Nixon and his conduct of the Vietnam War. If it had grown in Spain, the devil to be hanged was Franco. -- In truth, a rally for radical social struggle strangely felt out of place when the enemy was the political establishment of Great Britain, or the governing structures of St Edward’s and the M.I.L... but who cared?

I did not relish the prospect of finding myself associated with the bourgeois class; still less did I fancy crossing the line into proletariat territory whenever I needed to contact a student. Undercurrents of conflict caused waves of misunderstanding to disturb the surface of daily living, without anyone being clear as to what the causes for friction actually were.

Gradually, we came to realize that the key to our puzzlement was concealed in the heads of the above referred to *students-with-a-cause*. They had been bolted into motion by students who, in earlier years, had been brainwashed into rebelling against any regime that bore a similitude to their own national tyrannies. I remember identifying the main items of that brainwashing operation, and verifying them as parts of a common framework absorbed by each. Needless to say, I have since remained suspicious of the ‘formation’ approach to training, one reason being the inherent danger of shaping the students minds according to a *formator’s* convictions, no matter how outstanding his virtues.

#### **II. A CRITICAL POINT IN THE WORKINGS OF EDUCATION**

What we had to live through was, in fact, a classical turning-point in the process of education, provoked by a few students unable or unwilling to set reasonable barriers to their expectations; personalities who at some point must be invited to choose another road. Such a crisis is painful, but for the students who are in their true vocation, it is rewarding. It demands the tearing away of unrealistic dreams no less than of obsolete visions, and the implementation of disciplined planning and responsible freedom. It can be an instructive experience for an educator familiar

with the idea that labor is close companion to birth, but a frightening one for someone used to feast on untroubled continuity.

In any event, for a staff in that kind of situation, the vital question becomes: *Where do we set the limits?* You don't want to object to a liturgical reading being occasionally borrowed from Saint Augustine, but what if one day you are treated to a page from Mao Tse Tung's Red Book? You are welcoming to an evening of charismatic prayer shared by students and sisters, but what's your reaction if on getting there you find that Act II is a dancing session on the sisters' holy floor? What will Act III be like?

### III. A TELLING STORY

Here is my favorite illustration of the pain you can feel, torn as you are by sympathy for the other person's point of view, and the obligation to call off his bluff.

Most staff and students loved their 'Totteridge', its few ugly warts notwithstanding. One day, we learned with surprise that some of the students were lobbying for an alternative form of accommodation: apartments in town, please, each one large enough to accommodate a team. No thought had been given to such ungodly matters as cost, or the way teams were to relate to each other and to the staff. We prudently agreed to hear the arguments of the lobbying group... but what we got was a vociferous encounter that saw contradictory views being pitched around the hall, with hardly any amount of listening gaining a hearing over the noise. We discretely resorted to the most effective strategy ever designed on earth to resolve such impasses: the one the French call *noyer le poisson*, that is to say: let the crowd talk, shout, discuss and argue at will, until they are drowned in their verbal flow. It took two months for the trick to produce a last gasp, but it worked admirably.

### IV. LEARNING THE HARD WAY

Victory did not however come that cheap along the whole list of engagements planned by the extraordinary fertile minds of the Opposition. We sagely avoided head-on collisions, but nonetheless took seriously the need to part ways with the few characters that would not budge. They were quietly advised to move to fields where their fervor for reform could better serve the Kingdom. They did so... except one who required several weeks of repeated and insistent *bye byes* to get our message; that one would in due time make a career in the revolutionary trade in the country he hailed from.

Understandably, departures multiplied as Lent progressed and the Great Passage drew closer, with a degree of consternation being registered in some quarters. One morning, we found the following announcement on the large notice-board of the dining-room: *Would the last one to leave please shut the windows?* My Guardian Angel promptly blew the whistle and revealed the name of the culprit, but it seemed wiser, at the time, to hold my tongue. That was not the only occasion when discretion proved beneficent. There was that bright Sunday morning when a student asked for a lift to Whetstone. I delivered him at the main pub where, I learned, he had a job washing glasses. I kept my reaction to a low "*Oooh...*". He would later be in formation and did marvels. There was that moonless night too, when this guy imperiously gestured me to stop as I drove into the courtyard. One pint too many, I thought, to cap an energizing evening of pastoral activity. He was singing Schubert's *Ave Maria* in multiple voices, all the while claiming the entrance to the students' building had been moved to another, secret location. I kept my counsel, on the ground that learning from mistakes, can be a shortcut to wisdom.

*Those were the days, my friend...* but if you were prepared to advance through trial and error, they were good days.

## September 1971 – June 1972: A TIME FOR MENDING

It was September 1971. The event was of some importance, namely the arrival of the Philosophy students of Great Britain at the M.I.L. The context was the Institute's decision to provide an adapted syllabus of studies for students doing the Philosophy Cycle. Ours were to have their accommodation at one of the WF houses in London; they would attend courses at the MIL and benefit from a number of facilities supplied at St Edward's. This is how I got the privilege of getting to know such great personages as Francis Barnes, Terry Madden, Mike Bull, Bill Thurnbull and a couple of others whose names my memory refuses to deliver.

### I. THE TRIUMPH OF OUR MINIMAL RULES

That particular September, the staff, strengthened by the arrival of a wise Dutchman, Piet Horsten, had a bomb of their own to explode, and they came back early to fix it. What was on their minds was an open declaration that would clarify for good the frontiers left vague, in that vast expanse of unchartered territory called in those days *experimentation*; and that, it would do for all important matters concerning life at St Edward's. One day after the opening of the term, the Rector would proclaim the said declaration to the students assembled... and add something like this: "Gentlemen, that's our message! If you want St Edward's to be your home, you are most welcome to stay, but you must abide by these rules. Should there be even one that you cannot live with, please pack your bags and move on to where you can better serve the Cause".

The declaration came to be known as THE 24 MINIMAL RULES (or was it 12?). I still regard it as one of the most colorful documents to which, as secretary, I was ever asked to pen my name; and I would readily give half my old-age pension to anyone who could let me have a copy of it. One of the rules stipulated that henceforward students' rooms were out of bound to young women. Another required the rector's permission for overnight absence. A third one, I believe, fixed a weekly minimum amount of time to be dedicated to study. And there was this pretty common sense demand that caused scandal at the Generalate: that on weekdays all students should attend at least the three Masses marked for community participation. The idea was to leave room for one lie-in per week, but one that ought not to be enjoyed on any of those three days. The *furor* was such that we had to re-instate the 7x7 maximal rule.

All in all, our bomb caused little more than a mini bang, most students having by then had enough of tiresome tug-of-wars. One or two gentlemen objected in principle to what they considered an abusive use of authority; they moved to greener fields. From then on, life went on as normal, so much so that I find it hard to recollect anything experienced as so special, that it deserves being remembered forty years down the road.

## II. LONG-TERM OPTIONS

A few initiatives were taken, however, that would have repercussions upon the training of future generations of students.

- A NEW ST EDWARD'S

In the spring of 1972, a plan was devised that would considerably modify the set-up until then called 'Totteridge': we would sell the major part of the property, including the students' building and that of the staff, as well as the chapel and the sisters' house; Oak Lodge would be retained for the Philosophy students, and a new St Edward's College would be built right behind it. That plan was in fact to become reality within a rather short period of time.

- LAUNCHING THE IDEA OF A *STAGE*

In view of the changing conditions all around, and of the interrogations caused by the departure of not a few priests and missionaries, we proposed to the General Council that students who so desired be allowed to take a year or two off from training, so as to gain a valuable experience in the line of study or work, preferably in Africa. Until then, it had been possible to apply for a 'probation year'. That kind of application was exceptional and carried the risk of a negative interpretation, for it implied serious doubt about the genuineness of one's call. Our proposal was positive and flexible. It suggested that a request for time off, originating from staff or students, would henceforward be considered normal and desirable; it would not, however, involve obligation, nor the necessity of living that period in Africa. That proposal of ours was flatly denied. Hardly two years later, it would come back with a vengeance, from the Generalate, but in the form of a compulsory 'stage', of two years, in Africa, and for all candidates. -- *How unfathomable His ways!*

- EDUCATION OR FORMATION?

Third, a choice had to be made between the two approaches to training that had developed in the remaining WF Theology Centers in Europe: St Edward's in London, and our hostels in Strasbourg. From our Totteridge point of view, the idea of 'forming' candidates and studiously shaping their minds and hearts into worthy White Fathers, called for too high a degree of intervention on the part of the staff; we also thought it unwise for staff to be team-members on an equal footing with the students, with the status of 'grand-frères'.

The approach that had taken roots at St Edward's, under Fitz's guidance, was inspired by the concept of education. It started from the conviction that each of the students had in himself, by grace and birth in God's image, the luggage he needed to develop his personality in accordance with the particularities both of his human gifts and of the divine call. The primary responsibility for discerning his vocation and walking towards its fulfillment was resolutely with him. Then there was the aspect of engagement at the level of the group. At that level too, initiative and responsibility was first with the members, with decisions made after consultation of all. One staff member was loosely linked to each group and served as adviser, giving his view when needed at the weekly meeting. Policies regarding the good of all were made by the wider community, and involved the agreement of the staff represented by the rector. The task of the staff largely consisted of offering advice and direction; also of setting limits to personal or group freedom, account being taken of the duties of each and all, of the liberty and needs of others, and of the WF policies for our whole Society.

Needless to say, from the education perspective, the idea that we can call to the oath and ordain students by order of promotion is exposed for what it is, a delusion. It is a perspective that abhors mass production. A student is called to a commitment when he himself, advised by his spiritual guide as well as by the relevant authority in the Society, has come to the conclusion that he is now ready to take that step. It is not a matter of delaying or speeding on ordination, it is one of prudent reading of the signs of the times, for this particular disciple of the Lord.

Which of the two was the better approach? The question is bound to remain open until the Day of the Lord rises in the East, when we all meet in the Valley of Josaphat. What History has recorded is merely that the Strasbourg formula won the day. Amen.

**Marcel Boivin, M.Afr, May 2014.**

[Retour/ Back](#)