

Occasional Paper

The Congregation of Saint Basil

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Basilian Fidelity

Not much has changed in the lovely view from this window since I first looked out of it more than a half-century ago, late September, 1954: in the foreground, the “garden” of the Maison Saint-Joseph, with its cherry trees, ancient cistern, and gravel pathway to the College; the spruce tree near the area where we built a tennis court—now long gone without a trace—a sapling then, majestic now; the statue of Our Lady, the Immaculate Conception, still gently gesturing towards the house, ever in its place, quietly presiding over the path where we walked up and down with Père Roume after lunch, laughing and learning. There was no better tutor for the language, no one more interested in helping us perfect our French, than he. The bank of recently built garages near the kitchen end of the building has not intruded on the peace and quiet beauty of the grounds.

Over to the right not much farther off, the College, le Collège du Sacré-Coeur. Its roof has been renewed since the former roof was blown off in a tornado of a few years ago. But the outline is the same, the bell tower against the sky, the whole structure presiding over the town by its dominant position on the Mont Saint-Denis. If one is walking down below in the town, especially in the recently developed part to the west, the College comes frequently into unimpeded view, modest and benevolent, a kind of blessing on the town for 150 years.

To the left from this window, and more distant, fields, forests, and then the dreamy mountains, rolling away to the misty west and south, changing mood almost hourly—at this moment wintry—but never unfriendly. When one looks out at night now there are more lights, and more headlights because there are now more roads and more

cars, but nothing drastic, nothing to spoil the sweet nostalgia of what was here fifty years ago.

If this lovely scenery, however, has in general remained mostly constant, the same cannot be said for the College or for the Basilian community. When Kevin Kirley and I arrived here some fifty years ago, following the unanimous and enthusiastic decision of the Basilian General Chapter of 1954 that the French Basilian community and the North American community should be reunited after a separation of some thirty-two years, the situation was quite different. The College was not in Basilian hands, but was run by the Diocese of Viviers; it was returned to Basilian direction in 1956. It was an all-boys school; it became co-ed in the early 60's. It numbered about 350 students; it is now nearer to 600. It counted some ten to a dozen Basilians in a faculty of less than 20; it now counts but one Basilian in a faculty of 40. The College building has been greatly improved within, and a whole new cafeteria building has been added. Science and computer facilities are comparable to those in any school in the country. The College continues to have an excellent academic record and reputation. It has also a devoted and active alumni. Fortunately the directors successive to the Basilians have been deeply Christian laymen who have striven to safeguard and vitalize the Christian and Basilian heritage and character of the College.

Though the development of the College at Annonay has been a success story, in the eyes of the world, the development of the Basilian Community there has not been such . . . in the eyes of the world. The reasons are various and some quite obvious, such as those which have

affected vocations throughout the Church. The optimism arising from the act of the reunion of the two Basilian communities in 1954 has not been justified by later events. Not that interest in and attention to vocations were lacking. On the contrary, a good deal of thinking, effort and prayer went into vocation work, with the founding of vocation groups, the active recruitment of candidates with costly and bold initiatives for their formation, such as the founding of the Maison Saint-Basile in Paris (1961), and the devoting of personnel for this development. Nor was there reluctance on the part of the Basilians in North America to send members to accompany the French confreres in their work of teaching and of building the Community. Some spent many years with the Community in France. Since 1954, however, only four Basilians of French nationality have been ordained.

“In the eyes of the world .” This little conditional phrase, if it does not give us understanding of this particular passage of Basilian history, it most certainly helps reconcile us to a situation which might be perplexing or even discouraging. The phrase reminds us that we have another, and superior, standard to judge by, namely God’s providential will. In his will is our peace. And looking beyond what seems to be failure there shines a very bright success story. It can be read and felt here at Annonay in this small Community that is *faithful*. Fidelity has marked and sustained the Basilian Community in France from its arduous beginnings, its sufferings through the nineteenth century, its various dispersals, its struggles through two world wars, and its material poverty. The Community was founded to serve the Church: it can be said that this aim has remained constant in the vicissitudes of 200 years.

In this house from which I am looking out over the lovely scene of rural France and thinking of the years between 1954 and 2004, there are four Basilians, one over eighty, one in late seventies, a third (the superior) recently turned seventy, and one, fifty-five. All except

one, the eldest, are working full time. Bernard Buisson is teaching in the College, René Robert is chaplain to “Mon Foyer”, a home for the aged which he serves seven days a week; Jacques Deglesne, the superior, is parochial vicar to the largest congregation in Annonay. They have moved with the circumstances, not necessarily away from what Basilians were doing as educators, but to apostolates and opportunities where they could serve. Two other confreres, who complete the French community total of six, serve a half-dozen congregations, or former parishes, now attached to the centre at Villevoisance. François Morfin has for many years served in our mission apostolate in Mexico. Is he not symbolic and evocative of the early French confreres who generously left their native land to serve in a mission country? To be among these confreres, enjoy their company, their good humour, especially around the table, their serenity in a situation which is critical, is to learn something about fidelity. If this is not a beautiful example of what it means to be a priest, a religious and a Basilian, faithful to the Church, then I do not know where such an example is to be found.

As I look out the window, my eyes move to a spot on the left, just beyond the garden, where two very tall *cèdres du Liban* stand guard over our beloved dead, those gone before us marked with the sign of faith, who left us this heritage, I experience a good deal of nostalgia, but even more of pride in what is so evident here: a humble and gracious fidelity. May it ever mark our Basilian life and work.

Wally Platt

Feast of Saint Basil, 2 January 2005

Annonay