



Testimonial of Sr. Françoise Pluinage

I have lived in Anderlecht since 1973 in a poor neighborhood of Brussels, where mainly immigrants and elderly Belgians live. I worked as a senior citizen's helper for the Public Social Welfare Centre of the municipality (= housework, washing, shopping, etc.), which brought me into the concrete and daily life of the poor people from the start. Perceived by them not as the "lady of work" who comes to their aid, nor as the social worker who comes to make an inquiry, but as the "gir" on duty at home and with whom or more often they feel at ease, because they are in the same condition. What is very important for me, is how we live: the more we share their way of life (housing, work, contacts, leisure activities, etc. and even health problems; the fact of having to live alone, of "not having anyone" as they say), the more we

see the doors open and the bonds are formed among us.

In this sense, I have been able to verify this sentence of St. Paul (Phil 3:8): *"I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus"*. It is understood that to know Jesus Christ is "doing"; "being" where he would be from preference: with the poor and little ones. To live the incarnation is better understood in the sense of this same letter to the Philippians: Jesus, being of divine nature empties himself... If there is a passage of the Gospel that speaks to me a lot, it is this one. It helped me change my life. It is the washing of the feet. First of all, I live it concretely every day; and for me, it is the essential attitude of Christ towards each one of us: an attitude that we should assume before our brothers and sisters. This will give us joy. (*"Happy are you if you do it"*). Again, what I have understood through this experience is that we are all better received by people when we approach them, without any superiority whatsoever. Living this in my work with the elderly, I have also gradually learned to live it in my relationships with all other people, whoever they may be... which was not quite natural for me, I must admit!

Throughout the days and hours of work, confidences have quickly been shared with me the worries, wishes or any sufferings of today (a trouble shared is a trouble halved) the past, with all its weight of misery, family dramas, the struggle to escape them. (That's how I learned what working life was like 50, 60, 80 years ago!) And often I say to myself: what is the meaning of all these unknown lives, if there isn't God's heart to gather their richness? How else would such people know that they matter to God, if he does not send me to them with a listening heart? This is already a way for me to understand: to "be an instrument of mercy".

Of course, there is also help given to these people to keep them going as long as possible (especially in the psychological sense). I don't like to use the word "educate" for people in their 70s and 80s even if there is in fact some training to be provided without them suspecting it. It is good for them to realize that they can still be good for something useful to others even if they no longer able to earn money.

Also they might not need anyone to have control over them as to when they should take their medicines: things which show that others have "power" over them. In some cases these people are still able to do a lot for themselves and have their own initiative (so often they are treated like children). After all, these people, throughout their whole life, have been responsible for taking care of others as well as themselves. (Some of them worked as day women, or in workshops, sometimes from as young of 11 years!), have every right to have things their way from time to time! I am thinking of the delight with which, some time back, a blind lady, Mrs. Helen exclaimed, "Well, if I was told that one day I would be served like the rich woman I would never have believed it!"

Certainly, they sometimes have demands or quirks that are rather annoying for the senior helper (home-help). Some characters are more difficult or bitter than others; but we also discover in them treasures of courage, kindness and pure evangelical charity. It's a pity that there is not enough room here to tell a few stories!

Perhaps I will be told, as I say to myself from time to time: "It is only a drop in the ocean." Even in this already limited world of the elderly, shouldn't we also act in the longer term, on the structures of society and on the general mentality towards the 3rd age?" We have discussed this sometimes in our meetings of senior helpers but perhaps we should go further and get involved in movements such as the Pensioners' Union or similar associations. (Once again, I think it is better to treat people with respect, and not just dishing out to them from the top of our wealth, skills, or even relationships, etc.). In spite of what I question, I believe that there is a lot being done. However, evangelical values need to be put in place, rather than efficiency and great numbers. Much attention should be given to each person for himself/herself... This is a question that has not finished disturbing me!

I know that the above problem also bothers many sisters in Belgium, too old or poorly gifted for "politics" and ill-preparedness for social action by the kind of life and work we had before, what can we do beyond personal conversion and some services in our surroundings? Should we have a bad conscience about this?

In addition to this job as a senior helper, I was in charge of the Pastoral work in two old people's homes: one rather large (180 beds) under the authority of the CPAS (Centre Public d'Action Sociale) of Anderlecht, the other smaller (about twenty residents), a private home in my parish. I also visited some people in their houses or in other Care Homes.

It would take too long to recount here how I became aware of the loneliness and distress in these environments (what a difference from the comfort and safety of our communities!). But here again, there is no way of not being called upon by the mercy of Christ, who had mercy on all those sheep without a shepherd, on the crowds of sick people who crowded on his path. May be there is very little we can do about it, but at least we must try to do something. Let us be there, or rather allow Christ to be there through us. If I have been going there regularly, for a very long time, then perhaps they could believe that God did not let them down, that God is faithful. "When you are the messenger of the Good Lord", (the doorman of the home (socialist!) once told me, "you are always welcome". It is to say like Jesus "Who receives you, receives me"!

I was not working alone so I had the opportunity to review my work with others by participating in teams of patient visitors or hospital chaplains. But once again, the best access to this world was for me very humble and very concrete: I did my internship as a nurse's aide in the home, before coming back later to visit and bring Communion to the residents. Also the patients and the staff got to know me on the ground. They also knew that I was continuing the same kind of work and so I had all the kindness. One day the director of the home asked me: "Are you from here? But yes, you are from the home, aren't you, since you work at the CPAS like us! »

Alongside these two poles of activities: my S-H (senior helper) and the visits to the homes, I should also mention, something else just as important to me. My simple presence in the neighbourhood where I live, gave me good contacts with immigrants as well as those who live or have lived in the apartments above or below mine: (Italians, Turkish, Moroccans, Africans...). Those with a service to offer or a repair needed would meet from time to time, and the participation in this network of helpers that supports the parish in a more or less organized or spontaneous way. This is one of the friendliest sides of neighborhoods like ours.

In a broader sense, I also had opportunities to share about social justice with lay people, priests and religious sisters involved in the popular world. Every month, a pastoral team of workers in Anderlecht, met, and every week a small neighbourhood community met together for a daily Eucharist, not forgetting the monthly day of prayer at my house and the provincial meetings of the DMJ! In all this I would say that what counts for me, besides a wider information on the problems of the Third or Fourth World, was above all, not so much the content of the meeting, but the comfort of seeing the commitment of others. Seeing one another and seeing the way people reacted to problems and events, and of being challenged by them, was very enriching. This was all the more important for me because I lived alone.

But when it comes to social reality, I think you don't really approach it unless you live in it. The more the years went by, the more I became allergic to blah-blah and even to writing! (Where are the Harvests {a former newsletter} of yesteryear!) But isn't there a time for everything: a time to talk and a time to keep quiet, a time to write and a time to live? I'm not saying that a team debate, an article in a magazine, a TV news item, can't bring anything but you "receive" them in a very different way after having changed environment. When you've taken a few steps down the social ladder yourself, your point of view changes on everything: events, people, and opinions. And for this it is necessary that one day or another the grace of the Lord makes one take the step, from beautiful ideas and good desires to concrete gestures, however small they may be. Minimal, certainly, and even derisory in view of all the situations of injustice that have changed in the world. But gestures significant enough to express a willingness to break with the situation of injustice in which I personally found myself. As long as we are not ashamed of always being in the right places in all areas, and as long as this shame has not led us to try to change places, we can talk or hear about social justice, but that remains theory. However, if you make a concrete change in your situation, in your life, it is a starting point from which everything becomes possible. Everything still needs to be done, but you are free to do it. Isn't that conversion?

What is the role of the Congregation, one asked? Obviously, on the spot, it is rather with lay people, one priest or the other and Sisters from other Institutes who live alone like me or in small fraternities that I work with. This is another way of "making the Church"; more flexible and maybe less closed in on itself and more open to the people of God. The people of the neighborhood, moreover, do not care to know to which congregation we belong, they usually do not even know it. For them it is enough that we are "sisters" and that we live with them, in their midst.

From a DMJ point of view, of course, it is good to know that you are not living in a maverick way and that others support you, and tend towards the same commitment in other places and with other means, according to age and personal vocation. And with regard to our social milieu let us say "pre-conciliar", it is also good that we have given this witness of spreading out into less favored neighborhoods and dedicating to the poor a few lives that the Congregation could well have used to maintain its own works, or to populate its communities! It was to show in deeds that we are not there for ourselves but for others.

But let's not now put the somewhat triumphalist zeal that we used to put into the social field to make our schools work well: on the front of social justice, we don't necessarily have to be everywhere, neither the most numerous nor the best! In any case we are not necessarily the most numerous or the best! Others do things better than we do: let us know them, let us support them, or rather let them support us. Let us collaborate as far as we can, provided that one day we can say like Christ: "I am in your midst as one who serves".

It's curious: since I'm "retired", my schedule is much fuller than before, when I was a teacher and then a senior assistant, and there are many more doodles, not only because of my writing, which doesn't improve, but because my schedule is much more hectic, at the mercy of appointments missed, rescheduled, changed by my more or less young "clients" (from 10 to 40 years old!).), but since I chose, a few decades ago already, to be here in the neighborhood at their disposal...

They are, as we say at Pentecost, of all races, all languages, and all countries: Turkey, Morocco, Sicily, Latin America, Rwanda, etc. At the beginning, they were sent to me by local people: pharmacist, doctor, social worker, and school or college teacher. Then word of mouth worked, as did family relationships: I saw the brother, the sisters, the husband, the sisters-in-law, and the friends of the sisters-in-law, and a whole small group of young Turkish women later on with their babies, sometimes! Then people from the street, who saw young people of all styles coming in and out of my house, came to ask too...

It goes without saying that with such an assortment, which, moreover, varies from year to year, there is no longer any need to plan a programme or personal project to be carried out at any cost. It is enough to be there, to help others, when they ask for it, to realize their project, their life!

I don't know which author (humorist? shrink?) said: "How do you recognize a mother? When you meet her and ask her how she is, she answers: "Ah... the youngest has measles, the oldest has trouble with

Maths at school, my husband has been promoted at work, etc. etc." Well, sometimes I feel that I'm getting a bit like that, and that I would easily answer too (after a preamble, inevitable at my age, on my rheumatic knees!), "How are you?" "Well, Latifa got her nursing diploma, J. Claude the Rwandan missed his second one, Aylié has her baby, Rebecca is hurrying to finish her thesis before returning to Ecuador, Rosario, the union delegate, is once again in battle with her Mercedes boss..."

This may seem modest and even down-to-earth, in any case far from the great political and sociological debates, I do not feel very attracted to institutions or organizations (while respecting those who are dedicated to them!). However, I don't work alone in Cureghem, it has a whole informal and friendly network that helps each to help people in the neighbourhood, and those who come to my house make me discover a lot of things, unfamiliar environments. Because we speak French, so to speak, that leads to everything. Just one example: Rosario had come to improve his spelling and learn to read aloud (because his Italian accent and his illiterate French were being made fun of by his working-class friends). But I mainly serve as his secretary for his letters from union delegates, and I discovered the importance of social life in a company, and all the complications of relationships between men! And now that he is also a sports coach for the children's club where he has put his son, I have to learn not only about cars but also about football, to help him write his weekly reports on the mini-matches. Then there was the letter to the lawyer for his brother's divorce - and even a love letter over the phone to a friend who asked him to help him get his wife back! And God in all this, you tell me! Jesus Christ's proclamation? Spirituality? Alas, I realize that I have gone beyond the limits of this article and I have not yet said anything about the question of religions, about the relationship with Muslims, the majority in this neighborhood. Here again, I have no beautiful theories on the question (you can find them in the books published on the subject!). There would be a lot of lived things to tell but, in writing it would be too long! It will be (maybe?) for another time, in 5 or 10 years!

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