

The Schools of the Early Brothers of St. Joseph

**by Brother George Klawitter, CSC
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If there is one thing you should take away from my talk today, it is a realization that the Brothers of St. Joseph were not dying on the vine in 1835. In spite of the fact that all Holy Cross histories make much of the dwindling numbers and institutions of those Brothers, the fact remains that the Brothers were not dying. Not at all. Nor were their schools falling inevitably away from them. In 1835 when they passed themselves from the guidance of one priest over to another priest, they were sixty-four members strong and operating twenty-five schools. They were not a dying organization. In this paper I am going to look at the early schools and try to convince you that the early Brothers of St. Joseph in 1835 were viable and trusted as a religious teaching community.

The first school was started, as one might expect, in Ruillé itself. The group having begun in that town in July of 1820 with the arrival of the first Brother of St. Joseph, it makes perfect sense that Ruillé would be the logical starting point for foundations. Indeed, just six months after Pierre Hureau showed up at James Dujarie's rectory, a grade school was put under the direction of the third recruit, Brother Andre Mottais. Andre had arrived in October of 1820 and by February of 1821 he was standing in front of a classroom of young boys eager to learn what they could from this man who had been a Larchamp farmer all his life and had received rudimentary teacher training from Ruillé's pastor. Given Andre's later success as a mentor to young teaching Brothers of St. Joseph, we can imagine that his energy and enthusiasm would have made up for any deficiencies he may have had in the mastery of math, grammar, catechism, and penmanship, the foundation of nineteenth-century French education. He would be sent the following June to Le Mans for five months of teacher training and then in December to Paris for six months of living with the Christian Brothers to learn their methodology. On his return to Ruillé in the summer of 1822, he was invested, along with Brother Stephen Gaufre, with a religious habit on the road outside of town. Apparently Father Dujarie at the time was not big on ceremony.

While Andre was away studying, Brother Louis Duchêne, Dujarie's second recruit, opened a school at Saint-Denis d'Orques and someone (we do not know whom) opened a school at Larchamp, Brother Andre's hometown. The school at Saint-Denis d'Orques had a brother-teacher for twelve years, that is until 1833, and the school at Larchamp for eight years (until 1829). The school at Ruillé remained

under the Brothers' direction for forty-nine years (until 1870), a generation after both Brother Stephen and Brother Andre had passed away.

Why were the towns of Saint-Denis d'Orques and Larchamp chosen by Dujarie as initial foundations? We can only guess, but I suspect that Larchamp was chosen because the pastor in that town had sent Dujarie a prime recruit in the person of Andre Mottais. Dujarie may have felt some obligation to that pastor and so selected Larchamp as one of his first three schools. After all, Dujarie was dependent on the good will of the pastors in little towns to send him recruits so it would make perfect sense for him to give those pastors a Brother for the town's school. It would be interesting to study the names of the towns that the early Brothers came from and match those towns up with the names of the towns where Dujarie started his first schools. This task would not be difficult because Brother Bernard Gervais' matricule gives the names of the towns where each Brother came from, and we have a list of the first schools thanks to a listing in the French monograph *Sainte-Croix en France*.

So in 1821 the Brothers took over the direction of three schools. In 1822 they assumed direction of seven more. A total of ten schools in just two years, a rather phenomenal endeavor, especially given the fact that in the school-year 1821 to 1822 Andre Mottais was not in Ruillé. How did the seven schools opened in 1822 fare? Marçon stayed under the Brothers' care for fourteen years and Montourtier thirteen. Saint-Germain-le-Guillaume and Yvré-l'Evêque lasted nine years. Les Autels-Saint-Eloi stayed with the Brothers only four years, Ménil two years, and Saint-Pierre-de Chevillé only one year. The town Yvré-l'Evêque may ring a bell with some of you because it was the place where Basil Moreau was stricken with his final illness and had to return to Le Mans to die. There is a school today in that town called "Saint Joseph." It sports a large sign that can be seen from the highway. Whether it is the site and even the building of the original 1822 school where a Brother of St. Joseph taught has yet to be investigated. A picture of the school on the Web indicates a structure that could very well date to the early nineteenth-century. Today the town has four thousand people. Its church, Saint Germain, dates from the thirteenth century.

You are probably wondering how big these "little" towns really were. Today the population of Ruille is 1200 and Larchamp 1100 so they are of comparable size. St. Denis d'Orques today has 800 inhabitants. Le Mans has 144,000. But two hundred years ago the towns around Le Mans would have been smaller, but not by much because the major industry in the area remains farming. Without industry, locations generally retain population decade to decade and even century to century. Distances between towns, of course, vary. Ruillé to Le Mans is only 26 miles, but

Ruillé to St. Denis d'Orques is 45 miles, and Ruillé to Larchamp 85 miles. Walking at a standard pace, one could travel on foot from Ruillé to Le Mans in a single day, but Ruillé to St. Denis d'Orques would require a two-day trek, and Ruillé to Larchamp three days. Father Dujarie did keep a horse so travel times for him would have been cut down considerably. Brothers coming from and going to their assigned schools would have walked or asked to ride in a cart courtesy of a local farmer or tradesman.

Keeping track of which Brother was running which school would have kept Brother Andre Mottais on his toes particularly in peak years. And he did visit each school once a year to check on conditions. We have, in fact, the inventory he took of the school at Milly, compiled on May 7, 1829: it covers page after page in his ledger and notes every dish in the kitchen and every window fastener in every room. He was a very thorough servant. Dujarie never made visitations to schools outside of Ruillé. On two occasions he attempted such a round of visits but gave up each time before getting far from Ruillé. His illnesses, particularly gout, accelerated as he aged.

We can imagine that Andre's visits were anticipated with joy by Brothers who had not seen a Brother in months. Busy as each one was running a school, they would have had little time for visiting town to town, but there is evidence that some did visit each other, not waiting for the annual retreat in Ruille to enjoy some well-earned community. Brother Adrien, in fact, does mention in a letter to Andre that he has visited one of the near-by Brothers. Such visits were encouraged, not discouraged.

The number of schools run by the Brothers between 1821 and 1835 is as follows:

1821	3	1829	48
1822	10	1830	40
1823	19	1831	32
1824	25	1832	30
1825	40	1833	27
1826	44	1834	28
1827	52	1835	25
1828	51		

On studying these statistics, one has a very difficult time concluding that the Brothers of St. Joseph were falling apart in the early 1830's and thus needed new

management. They may have needed new management for other reasons, but loss of apostolate was not one of those reasons.

If we select one town to examine with its little school run by a Brother of St. Joseph, we might very well select the town Crâon. Located 73 miles northwest of Ruillé, the town is 38 miles from Rennes and 74 miles from Le Mans. More importantly, Crâon is only 18 miles from Laval. It is 36 miles from Ernée, where a Brother of St. Joseph was teaching for sixty-five years (starting in 1838, long after an abortive one year stint in 1823). It is 27 miles from Saulges, the birthplace (and death place) of the indomitable Brother Gatian Monsimer, who attended the school taught by a Brother of St. Joseph in Chéméré-le-Roi. Crâon is 25 miles from Chéméré-le-Roi, where the Brothers taught for twenty-seven years (1833 to 1860). The Brothers took over the Crâon parish school in 1827, the year in which they ran more schools than in any other year between their founding and 1837, the year of their amalgamation with a small band of auxiliary diocesan priests in Le Mans. In 1827 the Brothers taught and managed schools in fifty-two little towns, and Crâon was one of those towns. Founded in the twelfth-century, the town today has a population today of 4500. In 1821 the population was 3500 so the town has not grown appreciably in the last two centuries. The one church, St. Nicholas, was built in the neo-Gothic style, and the small rectory adjacent to the church may have housed the Brother-teacher, but such a conclusion is doubtful. It was not customary for the Brothers of St. Joseph to live in rectories—they generally rented a room in the town where they taught school. We have ample evidence from letters in 1840, for example, that the Brothers teaching in Brooklyn lived in a rooming-house.

Teaching in a one-room school would necessitate a great deal of energy and imagination to manage forty or so boys in all eight grades. There would undoubtedly be lots of small groups in which older boys could lead younger boys through the math drills and grammar exercises that the older boys had learned in previous years. For some subjects, of course, instruction could be carried on for all forty boys at once. For example, art would lend itself to mass instruction. We do have evidence of one young Brother in Indiana who took great pride in his artistic talent and, no doubt, his ability to inspire his little pupils to draw and paint happily if not well. That the Brothers remained in Crâon for over half a century speaks to both their satisfaction with the teaching situation as well as the satisfaction felt by the parish pastors and families for the Brother-teachers year after year.

It is quite natural to wonder how effective the early Brothers of St. Joseph were in their first schools. We do have the evidence of numbers: dozens of schools opened and stayed open showing that parish priests, city councils, and parents were happy with the Brothers' work. Certain Brothers did enjoy a reputation for good

teaching—letters speak to the excellence of Brother Vital Breton (died 1886) and Brother Vincent Pieau (died 1890).

There is evidence, however, of unhappiness here and there with the quality of the early schools. A letter from the Milly town council attests to the ineffectiveness of the Brother teacher in Milly questions his lack of pedagogical preparation, and notes that the corporal punishment tactics of one Brother would no longer be tolerated. So even two hundred years ago there was awareness that hitting students was unacceptable, revealing more the ineffectiveness of a teacher than the delinquency of a student.

At the same time, the very fact that there were some complaints about some Brother-teachers indicates that Community leaders in Ruillé, Le Mans, and Indiana were sensitive to the needs of staffing schools with well-prepared and psychologically healthy teaching Brothers. For example, in 1849 Brother Gatian writes to Edward Sorin the following evaluation of Brothers teaching in Brooklyn:

Our Brothers without exception are incapable of teaching school in the countryside and moreso in a city. I said they're incompetent first, because none (Brother Basil excepted) has method, and second, because they're all ignorant of some branch both essential and absolutely indispensable, or they have flaws which make them incapable of teaching. I could muster all in review for you, and I'd find a flaw which couldn't be satisfied in each Brother. Beginning with me! I don't know penmanship and I'm too deaf for a big class. Brother Victor is absolutely too deaf and too weak in arithmetic and grammar for an upper class. Brother Thomas doesn't know how to write. Brother Anselm is too weak in everything. Brother Ignatius is absolutely too simple. Brother Benoit is too singular. Brother Emmanuel is German....Isn't it absurd to watch [Brother Louis] give individual lessons in a class of 58 children who make as much noise as our boarders at the Lake [Notre Dame] in one of their ordinary recreation periods? This poor Brother understands his weaknesses, but he doesn't know how to correct them, never having received lessons. I tried to regularize his class (although I was as ignorant of method as he when I left the Lake), and I spent the whole week at it. I arranged them as best I could, but Thursday morning I left his students with him in despair, not being able to succeed in establishing silence there, nor subordination, because, not seeing clearly, or hearing very well, I wasn't able to know where the noise was coming from, and I couldn't understand the lessons they recited to me...In

spite of all the disorder and noise in his class, he has influence and is very calm, not abusing anyone with the whip, which he uses frequently (*Adapted 264-65*).

This is an intelligent and damning evaluation of the classroom situation in New York, and we may conclude that the classrooms in this Brooklyn school were not unique. Of course the pastor of the parish was no help. As Gatian points out, Father Bacon is “ill humored, prepossessed, moody, and wants everything his way” (*Adapted 266*). He packed 225 students in a building that could hold only 123. He was also stingy, and the school lacked basic equipment like desks and blackboards. One could conclude, of course, that Sorin was more interested in the salaries than he was in effective teaching conditions, but even he knew that long-term excellence in pedagogy would ensure long-term income. We should note that he had sent Gatian to check on the school more to get Gatian out of his hair at Notre Dame than to improve the lot of the Brothers in Brooklyn. All around it was a messy scene.

In France, of course, such situations were more manageable. The distance between either Ruillé or Le Mans and the towns where the schools were established was not excessive, whereas to get to New York Gatian had to travel in a sleigh from Notre Dame to Niles, then take a train from Niles to Detroit, then take another sleigh through Canada (during which segment of his trip the coach overturned and Gatian was almost decapitated). At Niagara he crossed the river in a ferry (in February!), then transferred to a train at Buffalo to get to Albany and finally New York City. The trip took a full week, and Gatian ended up with the loss of hearing in one ear. Gatian’s evaluation of the teaching going on (or not going on) in the Brooklyn school is graphic, but we should temper it with the thousands of satisfied parents back in France where the Community had matured around solid teacher-preparation over the course of twenty years.

I gave you the horrible details of the Brooklyn school because that situation was the absolute worst of the situations that I know about in the early years of the Community. People do like to hear about disasters whereas stories about good teaching experiences bring but some satisfaction to an audience before the yawns start in earnest. When all is reviewed, we must conclude that the Brothers of St. Joseph were superbly effective in their apostolic work. Numbers do not lie, and you have the proof in front of your eyes with the chart of school openings (and duration) for the first generation of the Brothers of St. Joseph. Even at their supposedly lowest moment (1835), they were still running twenty-five schools in France, and eleven of those schools stayed under their care for forty years or more. The Brothers of St. Joseph, therefore, did not move their headquarters from Ruillé to Le Mans because they were dying. We must look elsewhere for another reason to explain their move

north to Le Mans, but that is subject for another paper, a paper that will bring Brother Leonard Guittoger front and center for your consideration.