



JOAN MANUEL ARNAU

A PLEASANT YET DEMANDING MEMORY

by JOAN MANUEL ARNAU, intercontinental assistant in 1985

I first met Father François in Rome at the International Fraternity conference with Pope Paul VI. It was a simple encounter; I only saw him and we simply just met each other. I obviously kept in mind my first impressions of him, definitely subjective. A strong sturdy man, your typical Frenchman, brief but direct but above all a close and apostolic priest trained in traditional theology preceding the Second Vatican Council.

As with all human beings, despite these outside appearances, I knew that the entire fundamental nucleus of the movement was showing; one that filled me as a young priest, as a friend of several fraternal members I frequented and those with whom I shared a great friendship ... Although I knew his messages I did not "know" Father François.

I got to know this person when I met him personally. With the elections celebrated in Loyola in 1980 I became his successor as an International Chaplain of the Fraternity. Father François, its founder and who is 83 years old already, was exempt from trips, assemblies and pastoral visits. His words, guidelines and opinions always valued the obliged reference to ensure fidelity to the original spirit of our movement yet the direct responsibility to run, manage, make decisions, organise and host was unique to the action and management of the International Team.

During our deep and continual conversation, my affection and respect for Father François sprang, grew and matured. Marie-Therese and I went as far as Verdun to talk with him and ask him his opinion at the end of our travels to different countries and continents after assisting several national and international conferences after checking the growth, the weaknesses and several problems amongst the different teams and leaders. From this time, amongst others, I was amazed with three of his reactions. He knew how to listen and to great lengths. He was never in any hurry when we spoke about our happiness or concerns, yet his speeches were short, precise and clear. I once saw him worried (I could see it in his face and by the way he was acting), however charity won him over: he always praised and stressed some positive aspect, understood weakness and founds strength in a good reaction. He celebrated it in the Eucharist and in prayer: his homilies were short and lively but also serene and encouraging.

I wish to share with you some examples of all this:

During my first trip to Verdun as an International advisor, Father François invited me to get to know Benoîte-Vaux, the Marian shrine where those first sick people decided to give our current Movement its name "the Fraternity". He, strongly overwhelmed, spoke to me about this first group of sick people that met with him in Verdun, from whom he kept some worn out drawings. He told me as he went along of the first moments of that first grace, both sincere and important. "God visited us all –he told me- in that shrine dedicated to his Mother".

Following our trip to Africa, Marie-Therese and I went to Father François to share our recent experiences with him: multitudinous contacts in Cameroon, sessions and adventures in Goma (formerly known as Zaire), celebrations and visits in Bujumbura (Burundi), contact with the simple and extremely poor people of Diabo, Burkina Faso, personal contacts in Cotonou, Benin etc. We commented on the likely fear of paternalism, on the great sickness of material poverty... but also on the kind and gratuitous welcome from plain people, on the love we received and the pain and hope we managed to share... I commented the crisis that occurred during my first days in Africa to see in these people such need and irresistible longing they had to touch and own material things. I could not stand anymore in these moments and the sole words from Marie-Therese made me postpone my decision to go back to Europe. Father François made the following comment: "It was a good thing that your wishes were not fulfilled. The Fraternity has to be with the poorest and kindest people with big hearts with whom there is a lack for the love of God –without knowing it- that can be felt with our presence".

At the end of one of our trips to America we told Father François about the dynamic, young and sincere characteristics of this happy and promising Frater: training sessions, visits to many teams from different dioceses and countries, leader assemblies that we took part in, to name a few. A few significant problems also arose: robust clergymen and collaborators prominence, some leaders with more will for action than for training etc. We also spoke about the social rallies and demonstrations in which the Frater played a prominent and coordinating role. After listening to us and not cutting us off, he concluded: "Youth and dynamism are a blessing. Unaware of the path some of us are taking and the things you are told. I tell you that if during meetings we celebrate the Eucharist and if those responsible have time for prayer I have therefore no fear. I am not afraid because we will continue imposing our criteria that may seem mundane

or God's criteria that coincides with the well being of man."

At various occasions we voiced our concern and vitality with Father François for the Fraternity in Europe: determined leaders, fraternal members integrated in preaching, Frater groups working with other church movements and social associations etc. A few significant problems also arose: leaders with religious concerns but few missionaries, some Fraternities and fraternal members who started having economic subsidies at their disposal, an increase in material goods, leaders getting old with no trained successors etc. He directly knew the reality of the movement in Europe and answered us as such: "Yes it hurts me to see the loss of missionaries and less apostolic interest. However, you should never turn away from God's call that still shines strong, confirm this to your brothers and if you discover any fear of commodity or material attachment, correct this with charity"

I do not know if Father François tuned into everything with my way of being and seeing certain things, certain attitudes and determined decisions. I certainly confessed that I went to him with the will to change and master what could, in my way of seeing things, be a solution. Finally, his fidelity, great experience and his zeal for what he considered fundamental were for me one more thing I had to sincerely respect and value. And it must be said that he never found our decisions unwise or imprudent.

And to conclude, I urge to include here the brief and, for me, pertinent sentence that he wrote to me in one of his books Helder Câmara (Recife, 1982): "Continue, continue preaching, certainly inspired by the Holy Spirit". Yes, I believe, like him, that our movement is a gift from the Spirit. Hence it is our responsibility to continue giving our best at work. The centre of this gift holds more fundamentals than the original principle: "get up and walk", personal contacts, "the apostle most suitable for sickness and mentally handicapped people will be the sickness and handicap", leader training, team work etc.

Marie-Therese and I were lucky to have arrived at the same source during our years of international leadership. Now, twenty five years later without the presence of Father François we must continue coming to the spirit from our origins to continue being loyal to the Spirit's gift that continues to nourish our heart and hands.