

AN EVALUATION OF THE AFRICAN SEMINAR

by Bryan Wood\*



The heading is a little misleading as only part of this paper deals directly with the Seminar itself; the other part is made up of suggestions for the future arising from reflection on the experience of the Seminar. No attempt is made to report in detail upon the work of the Seminar as this has already been done in the Preliminary Report circulated by the Secretariate.

The results of the Seminar

The principle results of the Seminar have been:

- i) The breaking down of national, tribal and racial suspicions and prejudices between the Catholic Student Societies, the lifting of the cloud of ignorance about Catholics in other parts of Africa, and the transformation of the relations between the Catholic Student Societies from those between distant correspondents who have never met, to those of close acquaintances and friends. This will, it is to be hoped, establish a stronger sense of Community among the scattered student groups which will be fruitful in future cooperation in Conferences, student exchanges, exchanges of information and ideas. Of particular importance was the impression made on all the delegates by the South Africans; since the South African Federation is, at the moment, by far the strongest and most experienced Pax Romana Federation in Africa, it will have a very great contribution to make in plans for cooperation.
- ii) The realisation by the students at the Seminar that Pax Romana is what it claims to be: a world wide Community of students, that has something to give African Catholic students, and which really wants the participation of Africans. This has prepared the ground for future help by Pax Romana for the Catholic Societies.
- iii) The Seminar made clear a basic principle of Pax Romana: that the Catholic student must recognise the very great responsibility he has towards the Church, and towards society and that it is part of the work of Pax Romana, and therefore of Societies in Pax Romana to make Catholic Students aware of this, and to prepare him to discharge it.

Finally there is a more intangible but very important result of the Seminar, compounded of the three results detailed above with the stimulus provided by the simple fact of meeting, living with, and talking to, many new people: the enthusiasm, the flowering of new ideas, and the opening out of the mind that will follow for the delegates, to the benefit of their Societies.

These results are important; they amply justify the holding of the Seminar, and the efforts that were entailed: but to be honest in this appraisal it must be said that, as a Formation Seminar for Catholic student leaders, the Seminar was lacking in a number of important respects.

1) Although the liturgical life of the Seminar, was quite full the conferences from the chaplains and the lectures and discussions on the fundamentals of the Faith were not adequate to promote the spiritual growth, and the intellectual grasp of the Faith that are needed for a true leadership, and needed very greatly at this time in Africa. *There is no idea of the uniqueness of the Church*

ii) The lectures on Citizenship and on the University, while each was good and interesting in itself, taken as a series tended to be confusing and incoherent because of repetition, and differences of emphasis between the speakers. The discussion outlines, since they followed the lectures, suffered from the same fault. As a result, while discussions were stimulating, and ideas were often very good, it was very difficult for the individual to extract a coherent philosophy from the lectures and discussions.

iii) Although the lectures on the Catholic Society and the Group, and on Pax Romana did present a coherent picture the discussions about these, and about the Programme of Action reflected the defects of the Programme. The discussions were clear enough on things like future cooperation within Africa, and with Pax Romana federations in other continents, and on the general principles of responsibility to the Church, and to Society, but in general they showed little realisation of the notion of the Catholic Society as the Church in the University drawing its life from the Mass and Sacraments, or of the kind of spiritual and intellectual growth in the Faith that it was the purpose of the Group to provide; nor did there seem to be much idea of the sort of lecture programme and discussions needed to supplement the University curriculum.

Some of these failures could, and should, be made good in future meetings by quite small changes in the programme. For example, the Chaplains talks could be given greater place, and could follow a clear plan intended to cover something of the essential doctrines of the Faith, the Mass and the Sacramental life, and prayer and the life of Grace, linking these to the other work of the Seminar; and preliminary meetings between Group leaders would have helped them keep the lines of discussion clear. But there are two other factors for which adjustments are not as easy. Firstly, the Seminar was a bid for support, so that the programme needed to be as attractive as possible: this necessarily conflicts to some extent with what might be best for a seminar aimed principally at training. The programme is bound to be weighted towards problems that delegates are interested in at this moment, although a proper discussion of these may presuppose a full grasp of truths that are hardly touched upon; and a number of speakers may be invited, where one, with the space of two or three lectures to develop his ideas, would be much more fruitful.

Secondly, there was present, throughout the Seminar, a very great fear on the part of those from outside Africa of imposing European ideas on the African student, and a very strong consciousness of the fact that there are values in African culture that should be preserved. This gave rise to a great reluctance to make suggestions, or to express ideas that had arisen from experience outside Africa, and resulted in a certain lack of direction in the Seminar. Since the Seminar was opening new ground this policy was understandable, but it was not wholly successful and should be discussed.



## Future Policy

### 1) The Catholic Society and the Group

The Catholic student community must develop in two ways: in the improvement of its life and activities as they affect the ordinary Catholic student; and in the development of a Group Movement through whom a small proportion of the students who are drawn to do so, can develop spiritually and in their intellectual grasp of the Faith, so that through them Christ may work in the Society, through the example of their lives, as well as their work. This is more than a matter of discussion groups on Catholic teaching. Very many of the students have little more than a catechism knowledge of the Faith that is totally inadequate as a foundation for an adult Catholic life. Apart from anything else, the only real basis upon which the new African Culture can be built must be on the basis of a lived and understood Catholicism, for only that can bring a proper understanding of the nature of man, and of his works. The general activity of the Catholic Society can and should help to provide this basis, but over and above this, provision must be made for those wish to go further, and who will lead the rest to a deeper understanding.

i) The Group Movement. The aim of this movement would be to provide over a space of 2 years, for a few selected students, a spiritual and intellectual formation that would establish them in a life of prayer and participation in the Sacraments, give them a deep grasp of the essentials of the Faith, of the uniqueness of the Church, and help them to see the implications of these things in their lives.

It is probable that such a movement could find its basis in the Legion of Mary groups where these are at present established, it is to be hoped that cooperation in establishing and maintaining the Movement could be received from J.E.C./Y.C.S., especially as there are J.E.C./Y.C.S. groups in some schools. Discussion material and advice would be supplied, at least initially, from the Secretariate; but the Movement would have to start with a special Training Seminar, which might be national or regional, and such Training Seminars for Group leaders would be repeated at intervals.

There would be the danger with such a movement, of the Groups becoming divorced from the Catholic Societies, but only if their purpose becomes distorted - only if they are not doing what they are intended to do.

ii) The Catholic Society. There are ~~for~~ ways by which Pax Romana can give help to the Catholic Society:

By help and advice on organisational problems, on lecture programmes, and by the provision of discussion outlines (for these full advantage should be taken of work that may have been done by other Pax Romana federations).

By encouraging cooperation between the Federations in Africa, in exchanging news and information, the exchange of students, and by helping in the organisation of regional conferences.

By continuing the policy of obtaining travel grants for students.

By encouraging Federations in other continents to continue their contacts with the African federations and their material help in the framework of Entraide. A possibility that might be investigated is the circulating in Africa of tape-recordings of selected talks from the Conferences of other Federations, to off-set the shortage of speakers in Africa.

a) to suggest the formation of small groups  
 b) to provide material for the leaders of these groups  
 c) the problem can be concentrated on the intensive formation of leaders

## 2) Chaplains

There is far to little understanding among the African students of the fact that the essential part of the Chaplain in the Catholic Society is to bring Mass and the Sacraments to them, to guide them morally, and to help them spiritually. It is important that the students see the Chaplain as fulfilling this irreplaceable role in the Catholic Society. As the Universities grow, the fact that some Chaplains are at the same time full time lecturers in the Universities may cause some conflict of responsibilities, and there will be a need for full-time chaplains.

The development of a Group Movement will need the sympathy and cooperation of the Chaplains.

## 3) Relations between the Students and the Clergy

There were hints at the Seminar of some degree of anti-clerical feeling. This is bound to occur, but steps should be taken to prevent it from reaching dangerous levels: firstly, among the students, by ensuring, particularly through the Group movement, that the essential role of the hierarchy and the clergy in the Church, the meaning of authority, and the need for obedience and charity, are understood; secondly, among the clergy, propaganda to explain the difficulties that the student faces trying to find a balance in the welter of new ideas and influences that are brought to bear on him.

## 4) Lay Missions

Several students at the Seminar spoke of the need, in Africa, for examples of lay Catholic life. The propaganda about the Seminar by federations in Europe and North America has made many students aware of the problems of the Church in Africa, and has brought interest in the many forms of Lay Missions work. Pax Romana should follow up this interest as far as possible by providing information, promoting study of the problems involved, and by coordinating the work of federations in different countries.

## General Comment

There are two errors that must be avoided.

The first is to set too high an intellectual standard for the African student. This does NOT imply any acceptance of the idea that the African is inherently less capable intellectually than the European; it is an acceptance of the fact that the average African does not grow up in an environment that prepares him for intellectual activity—a fact that is reflected now in the difference in standard between schoolchildren whose parents went to school, and those whose parents did not. If too high a standard is held, then there is danger of the student concluding that the Catholic religion is a thing inherently too difficult for him to understand — and the last state would be very much worse than the first.

The second error is to forget that 'unless the Lord build the house, he labours in vain who builds it': Catholic Africa will be built by Christ working through men or it will not be build at all. The foundations of the new African culture will be laid by Saints, as those of Europe were. We must try to provide means through which such men can grow.

Apologies. For the awkward ways in which some things are expressed, and for the rash of generalisations - how far they can apply to the French speaking Universities I do not know.

B.M. WOOD

14th April 1958



Fundação Cuidar o Futuro