

## **Volunteering: source of an active life, source of a social life, source of health**

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### **A brief overview of the Little Brothers of the Poor: history and intuitions**

An association created in 1946 by Armand Marquiset: the 100th anniversary of his birth is being celebrated this year. He was a man who wanted to give his life to the poor and, not knowing where to turn after the war, he asked his parish priest where he could find the "poor" of the time. He was guided to the elderly and, little by little, developed an original response to their needs, first by bringing them meals and then by developing a network of relations with "little brothers". Through their presence and their attention, the little brothers fulfil a real need for these very isolated persons with few relations.

The Little Brothers of the Poor today represent a network of teams of volunteers in France, Germany, Ireland, Spain and North America (USA and Canada). The slogan "flowers before bread" unites these volunteers and reflects the attention paid to every "unique and irreplaceable" individual.

In Lille, 500 persons are assisted by 500 volunteers of all ages, from 18 to 85, in a genuine intergenerational "guild". We develop action programmes on health and housing and cultural workshops. And for the volunteers, we provide strong support in organisation and training.

Preamble: From "Will there be a War between the Ages?" to "Space Cowboys"

In our Western European societies, certain questions have gone unanswered for years. Through the theme of the "war between the ages" emerges the inevitable economic debate between the productive and the non-productive, between those who contribute and those who have already contributed, with the inevitable questions on pensions, care, buying power (it's now being said that the "grey continent" in our societies has become a grey "gold mine").

But it is clear that poverty and destitution are found among both younger and older persons (unemployment benefits for young people and old-age minimum benefits for the elderly). Life expectancy (without incapacity) is increasing.

We seem to have forgotten all the mutual enrichment represented by a relationship based on exchange and sharing. Intergenerational relations cannot be decreed, of course. And yet, in families only a short time ago this situation was simple and natural. This war between the ages leads us to take a closer look at old age, which Marcel Légault called the "age of fruit".

But simultaneously, along comes the film "Space Cowboys", whose Director, Clint Eastwood, offers an original interpretation. People in their seventies become indispensable because of the experience they acquired 40 years previously. This film with 70-year-old actors makes an original contribution, with a veiled message to our world of globalisation: yes, they are still there and are still creating culture. Age changes nothing in that respect. The media spoke of a form of "age activism", but in any case, the film suggests that retirement can be experienced intensely and not simply in the key of withdrawal and oblivion.

### **Why is volunteering a source of life?**

- Let's ask senior citizens themselves:

**Denis** has been a happy volunteer for 8 years, since he joined a team managing assistance for the elderly. He speaks of his skills (through his management profession), the talents he can still develop and his family culture, which steered him into voluntary work. He finds personal fulfilment by volunteering because his life is turned outwards to others.

**Arlette** comes to comfort and "help"; she loves life and wants others in difficulty to benefit from her optimism; she also grew up in a family that attached importance to devotion; she stresses the importance of the young volunteers in her team, with whom she experiences the intergenerational relationship.

**Jacques** speaks of his motivation to act, to be useful, to respond to requests for help; he feels that he receives recognition in return and his voluntary work provides him with a sense of well-being. He wants to remain "on his feet" and believes that mental health and physical health go hand in hand. He is 80 years old and goes "to the office" every day. He still remembers Mrs Marcelle, whom he visited 40 years ago with her son at the Lille old people's home.

These few responses from senior citizens themselves reflect the different motivations that range from humanitarian aid to usefulness, the search for meaning or giving and receiving, to which other typologies on the subject could be added. We might nonetheless observe that the motivations of these senior citizens are different from those of younger volunteers insofar as they have generally lived a full working life, they know their limits and they know that they have something to give through their voluntary work, but especially that they will receive in return. In this part of their life, they are disinterested, give of themselves and are free.

Their expectations of the structures where they provide their voluntary service: it must be a pleasant environment, where they have the happiness of meeting other people; and there must be organisation and method, although sometimes they stress the lack of individual initiative of the employees with whom they work.

- volunteering exists in a society and intersects with needs:

Our society is experiencing the paradox of not being able to provide work for everyone and of seeing social ties disintegrate. There are tremendous needs in this area of social affairs in terms of conviviality, human relations, expectations of brotherhood: social ties have been weakened. The major social protection institutions are having a hard time meeting all basic needs and are in operational and financial crises. The increase in responses by associations and various NGOs has involved the mobilisation of volunteering focused on combating poverty and subsequently combating all exclusion and discrimination. A whole sector of action has developed to fight social ills through new responses that little by little combine multiple partnerships.

What is experienced in volunteering:

- know-how and "savoir-être", or values
- intuitions and putting values into practice

Basically, the volunteer is a **PLAYER**, a term being used increasingly in the past 20 years to designate this human movement that consists of not letting oneself be controlled by others but acting in terms of an observation, an analysis and ethical references.

In voluntary service as it exists today, we can identify two main forces at work:

- a know-how that leads to action
- a "savoir-être", an expression of values and meaning

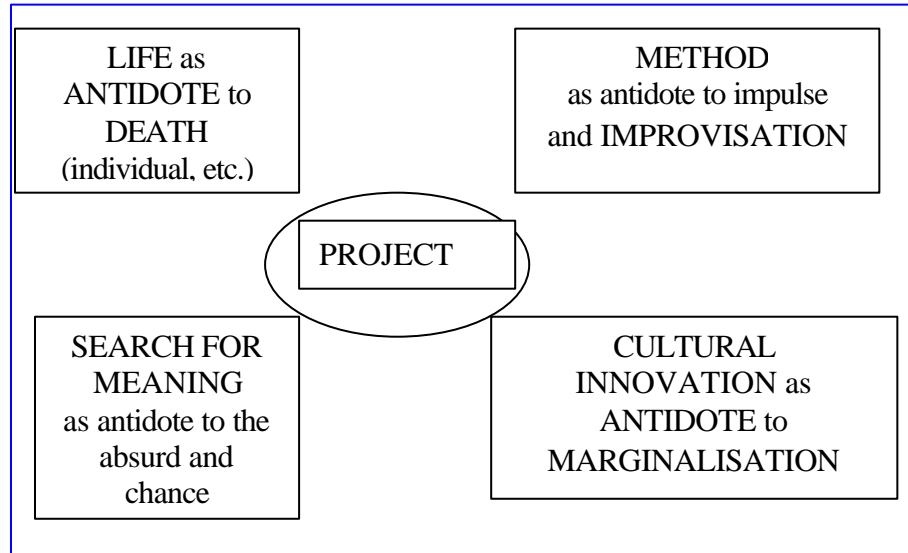
This intersection of two forces enables volunteers to live intensely their voluntary experience because it nurtures their convictions through concrete actions making use of their know-how. It is for every individual to determine his own point of anchorage and level of commitment in terms of his limits. But voluntary work is based on values, expresses them and puts them into practice through action. Without putting values into practice we fall into activism, without values we fall into a lack of individual initiative, without know-how we will do damage in our surroundings. It is along these lines that volunteering is a source of life and health, because it brings together in human beings what is in the nature of foundations, emotions, transmissions.

What volunteering brings to a project:

- life and culture
- membership and method

Voluntary work takes place within a **project**, whether personal or through an organisation. When we speak of projects nowadays, there are many different interpretations and approaches we might choose. I shall opt for the anthropological approach, which places the project in a state of constant tension among four challenges, an antidote so to speak:

- life as an antidote to death
- method as an antidote to impulse and improvisation
- cultural innovation as an antidote to marginalisation
- combating the absurd and chance through a search for meaning



The conditions of volunteering, the difficulties and richness of volunteering

In view of the above, how can a commitment to voluntary work be made effective, a source of life and well-being?

- joining an organisation to find an answer to one's expectations of framework, analysis, testimony and sharing of know-how
- working in a team to make possible exchange and sharing between volunteers and employees
- encouraging intergenerational relations between players and if possible a universal dimension
- measuring one's commitment so that it remains consistent with others (family, in particular)
- knowing the project to which one is making a commitment or defining the project one would like to achieve
- making known one's skills and know-how.

To measure the extent to which the voluntary service undertaken has the chance of being a source of life and health, perhaps we can superimpose these two approaches, that of voluntary work and that of project, and find convergences with experience, the experience one actually has or would like to have.

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NB: "Anthropologie du projet" by Boudinet is a stimulating book on this subject.

See original French text in the annex