La Salle Molenbeek (Belgium): A Socio-Educational Project “Beyond Borders”

On the outskirts of Brussels, the capital of Belgium, is the La Salle Molenbeek Community, a community composed of four Brothers from three different countries: Brothers Alberto Gómez and Juan Pablo Martín from Spain; Brother Mathurin Ouedraogo from Burkina Faso; and Brother Jesuraj Kulandai Samy from India.

The term Molenbeek comes from two Dutch words: *molen* (“mill”) and *beek* (“stream”), and it is also the name of the neighborhood where this community of Lasallian Brothers is located.

“This community works for the integration of immigrants. It is situated in an area where most of the Muslim population of our neighborhood lives”, explains Brother Jesuraj, Director of the community. “We help immigrant children with their studies; in the afternoons, after school, they come to us for help with their homework, since their parents do not speak the local language, and we are there to support them”, he continues, adding that “we also help adults learn the language, find decent employment, and earn a living (…) as well as elderly people who live alone”, organizing activities so they can meet and support one another, “and share their stories with each other”.

The Origins of the Initiative

Speaking about the origins of this significant socio-educational initiative, Brother Alberto recalls that “at the 2014 General Chapter, the Institute decided to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the death of Saint John Baptist de La Salle by launching new projects under the name ‘Beyond Borders’, with everything that the word ‘border’ means today in cultural, linguistic, and religious terms”.

Brother Alberto arrived in Belgium in 2015. “At that time, nobody talked about Molenbeek, and I did not even know it existed”, he recalls. However, when it was decided that one of the “Beyond Borders” projects would be established in Europe, “without knowing where all of this would lead us, I proposed Molenbeek,

because we already had a community here with ample space in a neighborhood that, ironically, became famous that same year because of the terrorist attacks in Brussels, at the airport and near the European Union institutions. Coincidentally, the people who carried out those attacks lived on the very street where we are now".

"So the project in Molenbeek, Brussels, was approved, and at first it was called Adrian Nyel, because the idea was to start again, to learn again, and to place ourselves in a context that today challenges us, calls us together, and invites us to recreate the mission".

The project gradually took shape as various challenges were addressed – including the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, which delayed several infrastructure improvements – until "in 2021, the construction work was practically completed, and several Brothers arrived," Brother Alberto adds, recalling some of the Brothers who have served there. "Little by little, this community took shape and was formed into the one that today animates the 'Beyond Borders' socio-educational project in Molenbeek".

Sharing the Experience of God with Young People

Brother Mathurin, who has been in Molenbeek for two years, shares that his experience there has been "quite intense", highlighting "the concern each Brother has for the well-being of the others and for the mission". "Sharing each other's experiences greatly enriches our lives, our work together, and our mission".

One of the experiences that motivates him most is "the mission we carried out with the young people of Saint-Jean-Baptiste School, which we called a 'Social Retreat'. It allows me to immerse myself once again in my role as an educator and as someone who shares his experience of God with young people", he emphasizes.

Encountering Reality

The La Salle Molenbeek Community also welcomes international volunteers and university students completing professional internships, such as Jimena Iglesias-Ucha Merino and Paula Sanz Muñoz, students of Social Education and Social Work at La Salle University Center Madrid in Aravaca, who have participated in several programs "with children, in Food Bank initiatives, and with homeless people".

“We have been able to encounter reality,” they explain, because “living this experience has meant learning how to live in community, respecting others and, above all, learning from them as well (…). We are also fortunate to be in an intercultural environment”.

This intercultural and interreligious dimension has also shaped the paths taken by this Lasallian project. As Brother Juan Pablo explains, “Molenbeek has a population that is 90% Muslim in culture and religion, while we are a small Christian and Lasallian presence in this neighborhood”.

Brothers for Everyone

“We have chosen to see ourselves as brothers to everyone in the neighborhood and to keep our house open to all”, he says enthusiastically. “We welcome young people who want to continue their studies in the afternoons at our house. Most of them are Muslim, and we encourage them to nurture their faith and continue their religious practices, such as Ramadan. In turn, they enrich us through the importance they place on their own religious dimension”.

Another important mission involves accompanying organizations dedicated to Christian-Muslim interreligious dialogue, especially the association Al Kalima, which means “The Word”. “Through this association we promote encounters. In particular, there is one gathering that takes place in our house, which we call the ‘Meeting of Five’: five Muslims and five Christians come together to pray and to discover something of the spiritual journey within each religious tradition. We do not engage in theory; rather, we share life, sing together, pray together, and also undertake acts of service together, such as visiting patients in a hospital or elderly people in a nursing home”.

“What we seek to do is build bridges between these two religions, these two convictions, so that we may truly feel like brothers and sisters to one another. That is essentially the meaning of our presence: to be bridges of unity and fraternity”, concludes Brother Juan Pablo.

***We invite you to discover more details about this inspiring story of Lasallian commitment to the peripheries through* La Salle Org Stories.**