

CATHOLIC SCOUTING OR CATHOLIC MEMBERS IN SCOUTING ?

A hundred years ago

Exactly a hundred years ago, on January 15th 1913, cardinal Merry del Val, Pius X's State Secretary, wrote a letter to Jean Corbisier, commissioner of the "*Baden-Powell Belgian Catholic Boy Scouts*". This is the first pontifical document interested in scouting, and in a positive way. Because cardinal Merry del Val's letter is a letter of appreciation and support to Belgian Catholic scouts and to what professor Corbisier was doing.

Groups of Catholic scouts had recently appeared: in Italy with Mario Mazza, in France with abbé d'Andréis, in Belgium with abbé Petit, without mentioning later British Catholic Troops approved by the English Primate, cardinal Bourne¹.

Right from the beginning, the problem was to know if the presence of Catholic members in scouting had to take place as it did in Great Britain, within a "unique" scout association, where the question of religious confession was left to the discretion of groups, or if it had to give birth to officially Catholic scout associations.

In Great Britain, and more generally in Anglo-Saxon countries, the choice was a « unique » scout association. In Latin countries, and especially in Belgium, Italy and France, on the contrary, the choice was to give birth to officially Catholic scout associations. In these countries, it was due to various reasons, among which difficult relationships between Catholics and other bodies of society, especially State organizations which were often in the hands of clearly anti-Catholic people.

Anyhow, Catholics were not the only ones to create confessional scout associations. In fact, there were – and they still exist – Protestant, Jewish, Muslim scout associations as well as from other confessions.

Baden-Powell never imposed the constitution of « unique » associations but, from the beginning, he accepted the existence in a same nation of several associations of various religious confessions; at the World Conference of Paris in 1922, he admitted them officially in the "*Boy Scouts International Bureau*" newly constituted.

Baden-Powell

Baden-Powell created scouting to train "Healthy, Happy and Helpful members of the community"². This training does not ignore religion, nor does it pretend to replace it. As a matter of fact, Baden-Powell has always insisted on the necessity of duties towards God, by affirming : "*Religion is not a thing apart from life, but life itself at its best*"³ and when he was asked how religion entered Scouting and Guiding, he answered : "*Religion needn't enter, because it is already inside. It is already the fundamental factor pervading Scouting and Guiding*"⁴.

However, whereas for many training and technical aspects of Scouting, Baden-Powell indicated in his writings a lot of means that could help the chief develop them in the boy, for religious training, that he sees rather as "the duty towards God", his indications are much briefer and are essentially limited to the study of nature, the Good Turn, the service to others. Certainly, these are important elements but they are not enough for a complete religious training of the boy.

In "Scouting for boys", Baden-Powell wrote : "*As regards religion we are inter-denominal ; we do not assume or interfere with the prerogative of parents or pastors by giving religious instruction, but we insist on the*

¹ The first troop of English Catholic Scouts appeared in London in 1909 in Saint Dominic's church.

² Baden-Powell, *Aids to Scoutmastership*, Edition 1930, chapter I

³ "Religion and the Boy Scout and Girl Guides Movement" an address of Robert Baden-Powell to the Joint Conference of Commissioners at High Leigh, on July 2nd 1926

⁴ "Religion and the Boy Scout and Girl Guides Movement", cit.

observance and practice of whatever form of religion the boy professes, and the main duty impressed upon him is the daily practice of chivalry and of helpfulness to others".⁵.

So Baden-Powell did not impose his ideas and let all religions that adopted scouting interpret it according to their doctrine.

When a troop gathered scouts from various confessions, Baden-Powell recommended to have the greatest respect for each boy's religious confession. And to the English Catholic scouts, leaving to Rome for the Jubilee of 1925, he recommended to obey the Church, their chief on this earth⁶.

Catholics and scouting

However, a Catholic is Catholic before being a scout, at any moment and in any situation. It cannot be otherwise because Baptism has impressed in him the indelible character of Christian and son of God. The fact of being a scout is a quality which, thanks to the Promise and the Law, helps him to live his Christian life better.

Baden-Powell proposed scouting for the training of young people; those who have given birth to Catholic scouting, especially father Sevin in France, professor Corbisier in Belgium, the Earl of Carpegna in Italy, have realized the possibilities offered by this method and above all they have perceived the potentialities that it contained to train not only good citizens but also good Christians.

These people, having observed that Baden-Powell's scouting coped perfectly with the boy's nature in the order of Creation, adopted entirely and integrally this scouting in every detail, without changing anything, but giving a marvelously Christian meaning to the whole scout method.

The scout program is precious because it takes in charge man in all his dimensions. Baden-Powell said : "*Our program has four goals : the education of character, manual skill, physical health, service to the others*". Sevin, Corbisier, Carpegna have reconsidered Baden-Powell's scouting in the light and the spirit of the Gospel, developing a fifth aim and making it more explicit : "*Christian training*".

For Baden-Powell, the aim of scouting is essentially natural. With father Sevin and the others, it also becomes supernatural, because the five aims of scouting are not elements of a program of human growth but the distinct and inseparable elements of a program of harmonious development in conformity with God's plan.

The Holy Father John Paul II affirmed : "*The meeting of the Scout method with the insights of Fr Sévin, S.J., has made it possible to develop an educational programme based on Gospel values, in which each young person is led to grow and to develop his personality, thus making his talents fruitful*".⁷.

And Benedict XVI wrote : "*[...] Made fruitful by the Gospel, scouting is not only a place for true human growth but also for a forceful presentation of Christianity and real spiritual and moral development, as well as being an authentic path of holiness*".⁸.

The aim of these declarations is not to oppose Catholic scouting to other types of scouting but simply to note that the fact of being Catholic gives it a peculiar specificity.

We also want to precise that Baden-Powell really appreciated father Sevin's work, so that he affirmed : "*The best realization of my thought is the one accomplished by this French priest*".⁹.

Baden-Powell had made similar appreciations to the apostolic vicar of Denmark, Monsignor Brems, during the Jamboree of 1924, when he told him that he had « *found in the Catholics the most intimate and profound application of the method and of the scout ideals*»; Mario Mazza also wrote : "*We were walking through the jardin*

⁵ Scouting for boys, Edition 1937, chapter X

⁶ Speech to the English Catholic scouts, in *Jamboree*, October 1925

⁷ John Paul II to the representatives of CICS, September 13th 1998

⁸ Benedict XVI, June 22nd 2007

⁹ Madeleine Bourcereau, *Jacques Sevin, fondateur et mystique (1882-1951)*, Salvator, Paris, p. 36

*des plantes in Paris when Baden-Powell told me : you, the Catholics, have interpreted my ideas better than anyone else*¹⁰.

Some specificities of Catholic scouting

Religion cannot be summarized in a practice of « rites » but it impregnates the whole life of the believer and his behavior.

However, the education of a person is one, unique and global and, for a believer, it is not possible to isolate the spiritual part from all the rest. This is why there is no “religion hour” in Catholic scouting, as it is the case at school; but faith life and its demands are always present in the activities. And it is not possible to separate “religious” life from the “technical” life of a scout unit. The chaplain is not only a minister of religion but he is an educator as any other leader.

In Catholic scouting, the Law and the Promise follow the trail opened by Baden-Powell but are interpreted in a Catholic way and are rooted in the Gospel. The motto “Be Prepared” was adopted by the Earl of Carpegna according to the evangelic expression “Estote Parati”¹¹, thus highlighting its practical but also spiritual aspect. The Good Turn is done according to the Christian meaning: the service is no longer only philanthropic, it becomes the gift of self at the image of Christ servant; the patrol becomes a community of scout brothers whose meaning is given by Christ; the personal progression of the various branches contains religious “tests” and “badges”.

For Wolf Cubs, Catholic scouting has introduced saint Francis of Assisi as their protector and has adopted a typically Franciscan spirituality. Similarly, Rovers have adopted saint Paul as their protector and saint Catherine of Siena is the protector of Rangers. For Rovers and Rangers the road represents not only a concrete fact but it becomes also a symbol because the Rover and the Ranger consider their life as a path towards God and lead their existence according to this “spirituality of the road”.

In Catholic scouting, usually, every meeting starts and ends with a prayer ; there are specific scout prayers and songs.

We could go on listing the typical elements of Catholic scouting. Let us precise that it follows Scouting as Baden-Powell planned it, very faithfully, without changing anything but impregnating it and completing it according to supernatural needs, so considering it at the light of faith.

The training of leaders, the association press, publications, meetings and all the life of a Catholic scout association reflect all this and support leaders and boys in the application of this interpretation of scouting.

All this would be much more difficult, or even impossible, to implement in a Scout association accepting members of all religious confessions.

This type of interpretation and achievement of scouting adapted to the integral nature of the boy was formerly adopted by most Catholic scout associations such as *A.S.C.I.*, *A.G.I.*, “*Scouts de France*”, “*Guides de France*”, “*Baden-Powell Belgian Catholic Boy Scouts*” and others ; and it is still adopted by the associations belonging to the “*International Union of European Guides and Scouts*” (with the requested adaptations, also from Protestant and Orthodox associations).

Catholics in scouting

Apart from this vision of « *Catholic scouting* », there is also another option in the scout panorama, that we may define as “*Catholics in scouting*”. It is the option adopted by the *World Organization of the Scout Movement*

¹⁰ Domenico Sorrentino, *Storia della Conferenza Internazionale Cattolica dello Scoutismo : 1920 - 2002*, Roma, Nuova Fiordaliso, 2004, chapter 4

¹¹ “*Et vos estote parati, quia qua hora non putatis, Filius hominis veniet*” (“*You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.*”) (Lk 12, 40).

(WOSM). As a matter of fact, for a long time now, WOSM does not accept any longer the constitution of confessional scout associations but wants to have only one scout association in each country. The national federations of scout associations, still existing in various countries (as it is the case in Italy with the *FIS*), are still admitted but the wish of WOSM is to see them gradually disappear and be replaced by “unique” associations.

Even the “*International Conference of Catholic Scouting*” has moved the adjective “catholic” from Scouting to Conference and it has become the “*International Catholic Conference of Scouting*”, estimating that “*there is no Catholic scouting different from scouting in general but that there are Catholic scouts within the unique Movement*”¹².

This situation of “*Catholics in scouting*” exists in the “unique” associations such as the Anglo-Saxon associations and many others. It is also the case of such situations in which, following the indications of WOSM, the Catholic association has joined the non-religious association, for instance in the Netherlands, Ireland, Switzerland in the canton of Ticino, or in some countries of South America. In the latter case, all Catholic scout groups have not joined the non-religious association and in several countries independent Catholic scout associations have been built up again.

The « unique » associations accept members of all religious confessions. Some of them foresee that scout groups may be « *open* », that is to say open to all religious confessions, or « *sponsored* », which means accepting members from only one religious confession. In several of these associations (but not in all), each religious confession is granted the right to form a specific committee in charge of issues regarding religious belief.

But the training of leaders, the association press, publications, meetings and all the association life are not managed by these committees but by the association, that does it in a “neutral” or “secular” way.

These so-called « unique » associations encourage the boy to observe and practice his religious duties, but it is obvious that in such a situation the possibilities of practicing scouting as a valuable support to religious formation and to personal life of faith are considerably reduced. As a matter of fact, the pedagogical, organizational, training support from the whole association is missing; any initiative is left to the boy’s capacities and his good will (however he is left quite alone in the comprehension of supernatural) and to the leader’s capacities for education of faith (he often acts without any serious support from his association).

A few years ago, an Argentine friend of mine told me that in the “unified” Argentine scout association resulting from the merger of the Catholic association and of the non-religious association, there was no national leader in charge of each religious confession but there was only one leader for the whole association; and this person changed every three years. Considering that there are numerous confessions in this association, every three years this function is assumed in turn by a person from a different confession; so, every three years, this charge is assumed by a Protestant, then a Catholic, then a Buddhist, etc. For the religious training of young people, I think that the efficiency of such a way of functioning is rather weak. My friend also told me that in the “unified” Argentine scout association, on the occasion of association meetings similar to our meeting of Saint George’s day, mass was celebrated, for those who wanted to attend it, at the end of all activities, when everything was over and when the camp was being dismantled before leaving.

Not everything is black or white

As in all human enterprises, the vision of « *Catholic scouting* » and the vision of « *Catholic members in scouting* » present a lot of intermediary nuances and many Catholic scout associations are not easy to classify coherently in one category or another ; but they have an intermediate position, sometimes nearer to one vision or to the other.

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¹² Domenico Sorrentino, *Histoire de la Conférence Internationale Catholique du Scoutisme: 1920 - 2002*, Rome, Nuova Fiordaliso, 2004, chapter 12.