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Brother Stanislaus

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# The Linguistic Aspects of a Field Trip to Crefal

Brother STANISLAUS

During the summer of 1954 I had a wonderful, rather a unique, experience as a student in the School of Education of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, U.S.A. One of the outstanding features of the summer program was the course called **Education A226, Workshop in International Education: A Laboratory in Comparative Education**. This course consisted of a study tour to the Regional Center of Fundamental Education for Latin America, at Patzcuaro, Mexico. The official name of this center is CREFAL, which stands for its Spanish form, **Centro Regional de Educacion Fundamental para la America Latina**, whilst its creation, duly authorized by UNESCO in 1949, was a little later conjointly sponsored by UNESCO and the Government of Mexico.

This workshop should not be confused with the ordinary tour (travel) now popular at many educational institutions in the United States. Emphasis was on study rather than on travel. In fact, the center became a laboratory in which we were given an opportunity to study firsthand the problems, methods, and objectives of teachers from Latin American countries engaged in the education of peoples in underdeveloped regions. The greater part of the two weeks, August 1 to 14, was spent in the region of Patzcuaro and Lake Patzcuaro. The activities of the workshop, which kept

us together and fully busy at least eight hours every day, nay, well over ten hours on three occasions, were directed by Dr. Claude Eggertsen, Professor of Education, University of Michigan.

Eighteen persons were enrolled in the class: three married couples, six other ladies, and as many gentlemen. Among us, there were many high school teachers, one college language specialist, one ex-army colonel, two school superintendents, and two university professors. All but myself were Americans. Though they were undeniably of different lineage, yet they all had their homes somewhere in the State of Michigan. Queerly enough, as I was usually wearing a blue-and-gold silk jacket with a large M near the left shoulder, I could parade everywhere as a typical representative of either the University of Michigan or the University of Montreal, as the colors of both were identical; however, at any rate in so far as it was a matter of appearance, I had everywhere the honor to be, and very sympathetically at that, introduced as such regarding the former. One thing we had in common: we were all full-fledged educators working for advanced training in Education.

From the very moment we landed at Mexico City Airport till that other moment when we boarded the plane on our way back to Willow Run Air-

port, some twenty miles west of Detroit, our ears were to be literally assailed and battered with Spanish. Happily, one of us, the language specialist, by the way a genuine linguist born in French Switzerland and educated successively in France, Spain, Germany, and the United States, spoke excellent Spanish and was to act throughout as our chief interpreter. Some two or three others had also a fair knowledge of that language, whilst the remainder, myself included, had but a smattering of it. Besides, a few of us knew French, and more could go a longer way still in German. Another, because of his immediate lineage, could speak Italian fluently. However, during those days of incessant intergroup relations, both English and Spanish were to be our main vehicles of transmission.

We had scarcely arrived at Patzcuaro on the morning of August 3 and gone through registration at a hotel, the Posada de Don Vasco, near the headquarters of the center, when we were given in English by Dr. Lloyd H. Hughes, an Hispano-American and Assistant Director of CREFAL, the necessary background of information concerning this institution. We also learned from him and from our subsequent readings that the term **"fundamental education"** means **education in the fundamentals of daily life and staying alive, that its main purpose is to help people in underdeveloped regions to understand their own problems and to give them the skills and knowledge they need to solve them through their own efforts,** and that such terms as **"basic education", "cultural missions",** and **"community development"** have often been applied to the same or similar projects and efforts.

There were then about 110 students from 14 Latin American countries. Among these were five Haytian, one lady and four gentlemen, whose mother tongue was French and who after a nine-month stay in CREFAL

could speak and write Spanish fairly well. Upon a special request from the Pakistan government, there were also ten students from Pakistan, two ladies and eight gentlemen. Although these had been set aside as a special group, owing to their non-Latin origin, Pakistani and English being respectively their first and second languages, yet they already could shift for themselves with the conversational Spanish they had picked up when we met them. For the sake of accuracy, it may be added that since its establishment, 18 Latin American nations had sent students to CREFAL. All students lived together in hostels. From the professional or occupational viewpoint, they were either educators, nurses, social workers, or agricultural engineers with considerable experience in their respective fields. For instance, the French-speaking Haytian delegation included a schoolmistress, a Public Works Department agent, two rural school teachers, and a lawyer who had recently been appointed School Inspector for a rural district.

As the reader may expect, such an institution could not be run without a highly qualified teaching personnel. It was pointed out to us that, unless doubled with technical experience of some kind, mere academic qualifications were very poor inducements to acceptance and promotion. When we passed there, there was an international staff of 15 sent by UNESCO and three other United Nations agencies: the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Labor Organization, and the World Health Organization. CREFAL itself provided 32 members and Mexico supplied 45 more to make a total of 92. This large staff included specialists in health, agriculture, home economics, recreation, and literacy teaching. There also figured on it a good number of efficient linguists. One of the latest arrivals was a chemical engineer from Denmark who could speak, besides

his mother tongue, English, French, German, Russian, and Spanish.

The chief purpose of CREFAL is to train fundamental education specialists, and it is hoped these specialists will return to their own countries and establish similar national training centers which will train people to work in the field. Another purpose is to develop methods and aids best suited for fundamental education in the Latin American countries. The students spend 19 months at the center, divided into three phases as follows: (1) Six months on basic theory in the classrooms and shops of the institution; (2) Ten months practical work in the villages in the Patzcuaro area, there being 20 villages accounted for, one or more of these being assigned to one working team of five members; (3) Three months on recapitulation work, such as group visits to other local villages, visits to national training centers in Mexico, the writing of a short thesis, and participation in seminars concerning anticipated work in their native country. Now, the working teams are organized so as to work in the five basic areas making up the program of fundamental education at the center: health, rural economy, homemaking, recreation and use of leisure time, and basic culture. Unfortunately, religion does not appear in the curriculum as a **basic element** in the training of man and of society. Students, however, are let free to practise their own religion.

Informative and most inspiring though this experience was to me, and still is today, from all possible viewpoints, whether educational, touristic, anthropological, sociological, and religious, yet I found it, and still find it, most exhilarating solely from the linguistic viewpoint. In fact, our main activities took the form of visitations, discussions, interviews, and recreations, all and each conducted in a motley of languages. The thrill we were then experiencing reached its acme during the second half of our

stay, when we motored, sailed, or walked to several villages about Lake Patzcuaro (which by itself is no small point of attraction) to observe the efforts of the CREFAL student teams and experts.

I still keep fresh in mind the visit I paid the last evening with my Italo-American friend to the home of Mr. Manuel Conronado, a CREFAL Mexican instructor, self-taught in the arts of designing and painting. This gentleman, while still in his early twenties, had already won for himself the reputation of a first-rate artist. His latest achievement had been the invention of a cheap method of printing posters by the use of a formula of wax and paraffin. Above all, his painting of LA VIRGEN DE FATIMA, LIFE, and DEATH keenly stirred our innermost feelings. Music, too, had its place in his home, for as we moved about from painting to painting, the walls of his two-storey little home resounded with the discal rendering of Manuel de Falla's LA VIDA BREVE, while downstairs his wife was lulling her two kiddies to sleep. She was strictly unilingual, his English was very scrappy, and we could but smatter Spanish. Thus many of our mutual emotions were irretrievably stifled through lack of linguistic interchange.

I also met there Reverend Father M. Vroemen of the Fathers of Mary (Montfortains). We enjoyed together long hours of intimate conversations and discussions over Missionary Africa and CREFAL, as both of us had already spent many years in Central Africa, he about ten years in Nyasaland and myself seventeen in Uganda. That was his third month at CREFAL as a missionary observer with a special endowment from UNESCO. He was then expecting his observation tour would soon lead him to Hayti, San Domingo, Cuba, and Jamaica, before leading him northwards to St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, Canada, to study the Antigonish Cooperative Movement. In a letter he sent me



Only village on Janitzio Island, Lake Patzcuaro, Michoacan, Mexico.

from this latter place on Dec. 27, 1954, he wrote: "Antigonish has something to sell even to us, African diggers". He, too, may pass as a linguist as, besides Dutch, his mother tongue, he speaks Flemish, German, French, Spanish, and, on top of that, one or two African languages. Such men are wanted the world over to attack the great human problem (in his own words) of "togethering the people."

Truly, language learning is of prime

necessity to ease intergroup relations and adequately to make out men's so diversified, and yet so common, personal interpretations of life in all its fields of humanizing influence. CREFAL evidences the truth of this aphorism; and were it not for its richly laden linguistic and humane pattern, it undoubtedly never could reach, as it apparently does, in so apt and efficient a manner, its primordial aims.

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