

Reminisces on the 70th anniversary of St Michael's Training College



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Today marks the 70th anniversary of the setting up by the De La Salle Brothers of St Michael's Teachers Training College, named in honour of Archbishop Michael Gonzi. The college was a milestone in the history of education in Malta. Prior to then, educational progress in Malta had been sterile. Colonialism remained obstinately unchangeable until Maltese governments were elected.

It was only after Self-Government was granted in 1947 that the idea was born to try to tackle this problem at its roots: The college turned out a number of qualified teachers every year. Incidentally, male and female student teachers followed separate ways at the time. St Michael's College catered strictly for male students while female students attended Mater Admirabilis College in Rabat run by nuns of the Society of the Sacred Heart and lay female teachers. Each followed its own curriculum and there was no connection or communication between the two.

The Brothers converted Villa Pembroke, previously a summer house in St Augustine's Road, a mere 40 yards away from the panoramic St George's Bay, into a place of instruction and education of male teachers. The sea was so near that after winter storms, masses of seaweed used to be deposited in front of the main door. On either side of the door there were the windows of the lecture rooms for two groups of 17 students. On the ground floor there were also a large refectory, kitchen and shower rooms.

A large traditional Maltese wooden balcony ran along the façade of the first floor. Behind the balcony was a spacious chapel, and next to it an assembly hall. Also on the first floor were the retiring rooms of the three resident Brothers: Brother Leo Barrington, Brother Anselm Cuthman and Brother Alfred Calcutt. They were the missionary pioneers who instituted professional courses for prospective school teachers in Malta. Brother Leo lectured in Divinity, English and Hygiene.

Brother Cuthman was the vice-principal. Besides being the sports organiser, he also lectured in psychology and maths. Brother Alfred, besides being the bursar and caterer, lectured in history. The Brothers also engaged local lecturers for Maltese, history of art and physical education. A chaplain organised religious services. Nobby Clark (ex-Army) conducted physical exercises. These were initially held on the roof of the building but after fears of a collapse arose they started being held in the strip or road in front of the college. The matron, the cook and the maid completed the members of the staff.

The Brothers attached importance not only on the student-teachers' intellectual development but also on their physical well-being both in the 'gym' as well as in outdoor sports activities, including football. Brother Leo conducted interviews to select the prospective student-teachers of our year with adequate qualifications at O-level standard. Those chosen included Eddie Sammut, now deceased, (Valletta FC), Joe Vella Borg (Hibernians FC), myself (Floriana FC), John Sammut (Mosta) and Paul Mizzi (Gozo XI).



St Michael's Training College's first class of 1947-48.

Louis Rossi provided keen opposition in tennis against Brother Leo, the gaunt, gentle giant who was over six feet tall. Brother Cuthman was also active in sports activities. As a playing member of the college football team, he "showed the mettle of his pasture" in his robust tackling of British Army opposition. Out of the 33 students, the college managed to form two football teams. This level of participation showed selection board's inclination.

St Michael's was a day college, with lunch being served on the premises. The fare the chef presented was nothing to shout about, but it was edible. And after recalling the periods of starvation of the preceding wartime years we were thankful for God's sumptuous meal. The Brothers sat at the high table facing two rows of students. One of the Brothers read a passage from the Bible to edify our souls. At the end of the meal, the students helped clear the 'silver' cutlery and the 'bone china' from the tables. A private coach provided transport from Valletta to the college and back. Mr J.P. Vella, the appointed prefect, saw to our behaviour.

We had most fun during music lessons. The Brother in charge believed that our education should include English folk songs. He played the tunes on a harmonium, a relic left behind by the previous landlord. It was difficult for the Brother to sing the tune of *My Grandfather Clock*, play the harmonium, maintain discipline among all the standing students surrounding him, and all this while continuously pumping the harmonium by pressing its two pedals with both feet. When his pedalling was not strong enough, discordant music blared out. In one voice of derision we would all imitate the dying cries of a malfunctioning organ. Taking the matter seriously, his voice would crack and he would bang shut the wooden cover over the keyboard. On moving back, his stool would fall with a bang on the floor. The laughter, the muffled whistling and the stamping of feet were more than he could take. He would order us back to the lecture room. However, he turned out to be a good

sport. He never reported the matter to the principal, nor did he ever harbour any ill-will or ill-feeling. That was a lesson of things to come in our teaching career.

Our final trial consisted of one week of teaching practice in selected government primary schools. The possibility of failing occupied my worrying mind. On the appointed Monday I reported to the headmaster's office of the Sliema primary school. I was greeted with formality and abject indifference. I was taken aback. His behaviour played havoc with my self-esteem. The school caretaker was called in. I was guided to Miss X's class. She spent no time in leaving me alone in the lions' den. I thought I would spend the first day observing and being guided. It was a sad day for me.

"The college provided an excellent beginning to my education as a teacher. But my God, there was still so much to learn"

I plucked up courage and set about to flaunt my authority on 26 innocent creatures. I boldly shouted: "Good morning, boys." There were feeble answers. In a commanding voice I said: "Stand up please." They did so together like drilled soldiers. "I want to hear you all say 'Good morning, Sir.'" I stated. They did so vociferously. "Sit down." They did. Immediately I said: "Stand up." They did so questioningly. "I want to hear you say 'Thank you, Sir.'" They said so in perfect unison. They sat rigidly in silence, awe-stricken.

The class turned out to be cooperative. The secret was that I based most of my teaching skills on what I had learnt from

previous teachers and less from the rhetorical methods preached in college. Surprisingly, I found an unexpected fulfilment and an inexplicable joy in facing a classroom of my own. I was a man in authority, a leader, a psychologist. As a father figure, I had the moral obligations of improving their knowledge, their personality and their character. The college had wrought in me a world of difference in my personality. The college provided an excellent beginning to my education as a teacher. But my God, there was still so much to learn. I did not realise then that my teaching career would last 48 years.

The growing demand for teachers meant the need of a more accommodating college some 13 years later. The building of a new teacher education college at Ta' Giorni was a vast improvement on St Michael's. It almost turned out to be a state-of-the-art college. Unfortunately, it had a comparatively short life and was unashamedly sold to Libya for Lm1 million (€2.3m).

As a result, student-teachers were transferred to the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (Mcast), which was renamed the New University. Then in 1979, when the government amalgamated the 'old' and 'new' universities under the name 'University of Malta', this gave rise to the new Faculty of Education. Thus, male and female student-teachers were brought together at long last.

The earliest colleges followed a system of a one-year day course. Over the years the duration of the full-time diploma course eventually increased to a four-year degree course at University. The 100 or so students that used to attend St Michael and Mater Admirabilis colleges increased to hundreds at University. Students were given the possibility of specialising in their chosen subjects and to decide whether to teach at primary or secondary school level.

Teachers' salaries increased gradually. Ambitious students went into further studies. Some obtained scholarships to continue higher studies abroad. Those with a doctorate degree were accepted to teach at University.