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Helping Young Immigrants in Marseille

Interview with Frederic Prat, a graduate of the Paris School of Mining Engineering, who directs a supplementary education program, "Youth Plus."

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"How did you meet Opus Dei?"

One day in class, a fellow student asked me, "Are you a Christian?" Rather indifferently, I told him yes; I

was only attending Sunday Mass. He invited me to a meditation in an Opus Dei center. I dropped the subject because I wasn't very interested in doing anything more for God. But several months later, I changed my mind and did go--mainly out of curiosity about Opus Dei.

Little by little I discovered the Christian meaning and importance of study and work--not just to pass courses, but to find God.

"You started a youth association in Marseille?"

Yes. After completing my degree in mining engineering, I decided to go into the field of education, in view of the many difficulties disadvantaged youths are facing. I saw the frustration of young men like an infirm fellow of great intellectual promise whose father thought him useless because he hadn't received top grades. His teachers wouldn't

Speak with me about him because I wasn't related to his family. So I looked for another way to help him.

Now a hundred or so young people like him come to our center, "Youth Plus," where sixty volunteers tutor them in their studies. The week in between these classes gives the students time to work on their own without becoming dependent on their tutors. Our center is located in a troubled section of Marseille which is often disrupted by labor disputes; many young people drop out of school. We try to motivate each student's self-confidence to convince him that he can succeed in school. Often the problem is simply one of unfamiliarity with the academic system. When an older person takes an interest in a boy, it encourages him to work out his problems.

"What is Opus Dei's connection?"

The Christian spirit of Opus Dei encouraged me to become aware of other people's problems. As I learned of many initiatives like ours promoted by members of Opus Dei around the world, I could see that what the young people react to above all is the personal interest shown to them by people formed by Opus Dei. That matters even more than the competence of those who are helping them. This dedication, this concern for others is the primary way to help them resolve their problems.

The next step is to develop their capacity for employment by helping them to make their own decisions, to form sound criteria, without mindlessly imitating others. That is the path toward happiness and knowing God. But the first step is to keep religious discrimination from causing them to fail academically. The section of the city where we are located has a high proportion of

Muslims; our program is highly respectful of their faith. The Christian view of man leads us to value each boy as he is--as a person, not simply a student or a mere consumer.

The City Council of Marseille is helping support our program, but we also depend on many individuals to assist needy youths like one I just recalled: When his parents died, he was placed in the care of a handicapped aunt. His teachers were unable to motivate him, but now, after two months with one of our tutors, he has overcome his situation by seeing that there are people concerned about him. It seemed to us almost a miracle. It's an unusual case, but it helps to understand what we are attempting to do in "Youth Plus."

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