

Pakistan

It was in the early 1960s that the Marists at Rome were asked to seriously consider a school in Pakistan, even if it would certainly be a mission school and we could never expect to have any candidates from them. There were many Catholic families living in separate but crowded areas. We were not to try to make conversions, and we were certainly not to expect to get any candidates for our congregation, but I was asked to contact the Bishop Hettinger of the capital city of the country and ask his direction. I had made an appointment to meet the Bishop on my visit to Pakistan. He brought me by car to Islamabad and pointed to a hillside showing a beautiful high school with several buildings. He pointed out that most of the children of the politicians and moneyed people were enrolled there and it was run like a British-style academy. He assured me that it was making good money and had a great reputation and finished by saying, "Brother, it's all yours!"

I looked at the Bishop and told him that this was not in the spirit of our Founder, and that I would like him to take me to the poorest school in his Diocese. He probably thought I was crazy but he liked what he heard as I explained that this is how our Founder would want us to start. He drove me in his car for two hours and took me to the poorest school in his Diocese, near the city dump in Peshawar. He explained that he had two schools in Peshawar: the main one was St. Mary's in the city, where all the children of the military compound were educated, and it was doing well and even supporting the poor school of the Diocese. On the other hand there was St. John Vianey near the city dumps, which had about 60 percent Catholics and 40 percent Muslims. St. Mary's was around 90 percent Muslim and 10 percent Catholics. The teaching in St. Mary's was in English while that of St. John Vianey was in Urdu, the native language. The profit from St. Mary's was what supported the St. Vianey school. If we accepted St. John, the poorest, then we would also take care of St. Mary's, which was the richest. I agreed to take both, and to furnish him with a principal for St. Mary's and there would be two Brothers for St. Vianey. They would be teachers for there was already a fine Catholic principal running the school at St. Vianey.

I asked him to put up a residence for the Brothers in the same style as the local people and to have four rooms for the Brothers teaching in both schools. The fourth room was for visitors who would come among the Brothers. We also got permission to have a small building as a hostel, for that is where we would eventually get our candidates. We were told that we would never get any candidates, but found the opposite to be true. The present person in charge of Caritas for the Diocese is a graduate of our school. We already have a fully trained Marist Brother who just completed studies at the International College in Manila and is serving in Peshawar. We also have a few other Marist Pakistani candidates in training in Sri Lanka and Manila.

Just to give you an idea of the poverty of the St. Vianey School: there was no furniture; the students squatted on the floor; they all had a piece of plywood to write their assignments in ink; when the board was filled on both sides, they would raise their hand to get permission to go to the yard to wash off their plywood and put it in the sun to dry while they selected another clean one. I will not go into any further details for I have said enough already. We took both schools; we are still in both of them; and we have opened another similar school in Sargodah. We will make sure to set up a hostel there also. These hostels help our students get higher grades in exams and provide candidates for the mission work of the Church.

Sargodah is a much richer school located near Peshawar, and eventually we will also have some native Marists join us in our work for the poor people of Pakistan. Our schools—St. Mary's, St. John's, and the Catholic School of Sargodah—are all tributes to the hardworking Marists of the Sri Lanka Province. At this point I wish to pay special tribute to our first Marist Brother buried in Pakistan—our Spanish missionary, Brother Bernard, FMS.