

## **VOLUNTARY INVOLVEMENT GIVES EACH PERSON AN OPPORTUNITY TO LIVE AND TO GROW**



Since I've been in the **Coup de Pouce University (CPU)** in Lyon, I discover day after day how my involvement in accompanying foreign students is an astonishing adventure: opening me to universality. Exchanges about every subject are always respectful, full of curiosity and quite often they have a spiritual dimension. The young people offer support and help to each other as well in the cafeteria corner. Yes! In this place one works modestly but certainly for peace.

A question I always ask myself is how to be as fully present as possible to those who are referred to me for a few hours each week. Most of the time, I give French lessons to asylum seekers who are complete beginners. In their own countries, they have attained BAC level or sometimes BAC +1, +2, +6! I know life is not easy for them, they are "with us", excluded from work, from warm accommodation, highly dependent and always awaiting an answer from administrative authorities. I want my accompanying to be friendly so I have to be careful to call each one by their name even when the pronunciation is difficult. Actually, the Coup de Pouce University is a place where they can exist like other students with their own identity, and I appreciate that "ordinary" students coming from China, Taiwan, Colombia or Iran mix with them to learn French or they come early to have a drink, a cup of tea or coffee, all together, in the leisure corner.

My accompanying does not form part of the Refugee Council which gathers their requests for asylum, I do not have to ask questions about the reasons for their arrival in France. It is just about helping them to learn French. Good quick progress is made in oral comprehension but written expression is harder! During this hour and a half, we need to be happy together, almost without "worry."

As they gradually grow in confidence, they don't talk about their story but they want to get to know our country, our culture and to contribute something themselves. In short, to create links. What a joy it is to share a festive meal when they can introduce the tastes of their own food specialities prepared the evening before!

Part of my accompanying is to absorb their anguish about the future. Even when they cannot express this in words, their faces "speak". It is difficult for them to learn regularly because they are always being pushed around in daily life by all kinds of important business. I have to be patient about their absences and I feel they like me to be strongly insistent that they come; "you must come, it's important, I missed you yesterday." Sometimes, I telephone, simply to let them hear that I'm waiting for them and they come! It's also hearing their cries for help and answering competently. Some have said to me, "Madame Dominique, the counsellor asked" and they know what information they need for their "file"... but they are under no illusion, ... so to lighten the atmosphere we conclude: "If necessary we'll write to the President of the Republic!". I went to visit the family, I gave the testimony needed, the CPU stamped the file.

And so, friendliness, voluntary care and great reciprocal respect gives each person a chance to live, to grow, if possible with a little joy, in a world that "gives no presents."

Sister Dominique Marie (FRANCE)