



## Independence isn't the issue

In September 2016 the PATRIZIA KinderHaus in Yaoundé, Cameroon, celebrated its grand opening. It will serve as a secondary school, accommodating up to 800 students per year spread across four forms at the grammar school. The school was built as part of a cooperation between the PATRIZIA KinderHaus-Stiftung and the Catholic Pallottine Society. The tables and chairs which equip the 21 classrooms are something that Bert Meyer is particularly proud of: they were made in the carpentry workshop established in Yaoundé by the Pallottines between 1996 and 2008. Looked at from a 'first world' perspective, it's a perfect example of the long-lasting success of charity work: teaching people a trade and setting up an operation that can sustain itself – all steps towards independence. In talking to Rev. Bro. Bert Meyer, it became clear, however, that independence isn't the value he himself finds most important.



Bro. Bert (middle) in Cameroon:  
teacher, guide and friend.

**estatemagazine:** Brother Bert, are you proud of the boys that go through 'your' carpentry workshop?

**Brother Bert:** I'm happy for them! The workshop is running very well and I hope it stays that way. Nothing is more motivating than full order books. The largest order the workshop has had so far came from the school. Two hundred school benches have already been delivered, another two hundred will follow over the next two years.

**estatemagazine:** How is the carpentry set up?

**Brother Bert:** There are always five or six trained full-time carpenters here and they are here for roughly the same number of apprentices. But the number of apprentices varies which can be attributed to drop-out rates – many don't hang in there. They simply stop coming and don't show up again. You have to really take them by the hand to help them see the whole training through to the end.

**estatemagazine:** So from a broader perspective, it's about a lifelong connection, not just job training?

**Brother Bert:** Yes, because we believe that kids need role models, people who can act as guides, who set a good example with things that seem worth striving for. The Pallottines in Cameroon take on this role, be it as teachers or mentors at the school we've established.

**estatemagazine:** To what extent do education and training help the people become independent?

**Brother Bert:** Education is an essential key to life and it makes life easier than if you have to work things out for yourself. I'm not sure if it also leads

directly to something like 'independence'. It's important to understand that in Cameroon there are other priorities. Things like earning a living, keeping a roof over one's head. Existential things. The ambition of going beyond this (as we've seemed to internalise in our European way of thinking), of becoming successful and where possible breaking free from things is something that isn't too widespread in Cameroon.

**estatemagazine:** Is being independent more of a European thing?

**Brother Bert:** In Africa people just don't think much about it. In Europe it's become almost trendy: independence, individualism, self-centredness, all of that. I find it questionable because so much egotism – and that's what I think fuels this behaviour – prevents a sense of community and relationships between people. Those who are too preoccupied with themselves, who think only of themselves, become uncompromising. We Pallottines believe that God is perpetually self-reflective and needs you (or rather each individual) to enter into a dialogue and have a sparring partner. And as far as I'm concerned, that contradicts the idea of 'independence'.

**estatemagazine:** What do you think can be achieved through education in Cameroon?

**Brother Bert:** It should strengthen the lower middle class of the country to become more independent, if you will. In doing so, we hope to see mid-term to long-term political and social change. But those are ideals that aren't really within reach yet. That said, we do see little glimmers of hope that confirm that small changes are happening in Cameroon: for example, the tax offices in Cameroon were recently computerised. That may sound laughable to our European ears, but for Cameroon it means that processes can



now be recorded through one central location for the first time, not just be filed manually in a big pile of documents. This makes things more transparent and also leaves less room to buck the system. Something is definitely happening, that's for sure. And a proper education can certainly contribute to this development.

**estatemagazine:** What do you feel is the most important thing you can give to people in the countries where you do charitable work?

**Brother Bert:** It isn't necessarily independence. What's more important is that the people have a good standard of living. Not in a material sense, but in terms of their own satisfaction. Expressing that in more religious terms: God wants everyone to live their life and go their own way. We help with that and relate it more to the individual person than to society as a whole. But of course we also always hold on to the hope that we can make changes as a whole.

**estatemagazine:** What would you say is something we should try to make ourselves free from?

**Brother Bert:** We will always be products of the culture in which we grew up, the culture that shaped who we are today – whether it's Germany or Cameroon. A German will always think German and a Cameroonian will always think like a Cameroonian. And that's a good thing. But what I find important (and it's something that's very prominent in missionary work) is the ability to change how we think, to see ourselves from an outside perspective. And, to keep using the term, to find the patience to listen to others and not take action by going over their head – *independent* of the cultural backgrounds that shape us. After all, no-one is above another. Many people –

particularly we Europeans – act that way. We have to learn to once again free ourselves from our cultural bias and engage with people on an equal footing.

**estatemagazine:** You consider independence to be...

**Brother Bert:** In many respects, I see independence as an illusion. Shaped by the media, advertising and such. And if independence – in the way it's so often portrayed – comes at the cost of compromise or is a cost to the community, then I'm not sure it's something we should strive for.

**estatemagazine:** Thanks for the interview!

← Simone Wiplinger

## → PATRIZIA KINDERHAUS-STIFTUNG

Access to education regardless of background, gender or creed: this is one of the stated aims of the PATRIZIA KinderHaus-Stiftung. The PATRIZIA KinderHaus in Yaoundé, Cameroon, acts as a secondary school and is one of many such institutions offered by the KinderHaus-Stiftung to children across the globe to meet their need for education. In all places, the starting point is often the same: for example, 50% of junior school pupils in Cameroon have no access to secondary education. This is now made available to them at the PATRIZIA KinderHaus. The school gives a secondary education to 800 children every year, making a valuable contribution towards fundamentally improving the education system in this nation on the west coast of Africa. The Pallottine brotherhood from Friedberg (near Augsburg) is a project partner to the foundation. More: [www.kinderhausstiftung.de/en](http://www.kinderhausstiftung.de/en) and [www.pallottiner.org](http://www.pallottiner.org).