

PRIEST-WORKMEN: THEIR PRESENT POSITION IN FRANCE

AT the present time the problem of priest-workmen is once more to the fore. This is not due to any advertisement of their experiences which such priests have made, for they dread nothing so much as publicity. Their action can only develop in silence. Moreover, it is difficult to present their work to the public in its true light. Many of the superficial or impulsive judgments which one hears passed on the priest-workmen come from an insufficient knowledge of the milieu they are trying to reach and of the conditions of their apostolate. Today the silence is broken but the necessity of prudence remains, a requirement which is not always observed as it should be.

For practical purposes, the first publicity in the press dates from 1946, when several articles on the apostolic side of their activity were published in *Témoignage Chrétien*. The second phase dates from 1949. In March of that year an account of 'The Paris Mission' (which remains one of the best and most solid explanations of the task undertaken by the priest-workmen), appeared in *Etudes*. A little later, in July, articles of the 'sensational' type began to appear. Almost at the same time, Jean Balensi published an extensive inquiry in *Paris-Presse* under the title 'Shock-Christians', and Jean-Loup Dariel published an article in *France-Soir* under the title 'The Church's Commandos'. It was just at this time that a decree of the Holy Office excommunicated all those adhering to the materialist and anti-Christian teaching of the Communists, and particularly those who defended or propagated it. M. Dariel's account was afterwards re-issued as *Chez les prêtres ouvriers* (Editions Chambriand). These inquiries and accounts were confined to the superficial aspects of the mission of the priest-workmen. Certain expressions, such as 'The Church's Commandos' or 'The Vatican's Fifth Column', laid the priest-workmen open to the danger of being taken for free-lance clergy whose mission was to spy or to create 'cells'. It was then that Canon

Hollande, Superior of the Paris Mission, said: 'We have the right to claim our years of silence'.

The third wave of publicity is taking place now. The essence of its origins 'is to be found in Gilbert Cesbron's book, *Les Saints vont en enfer*, which has enjoyed a great success. This work has been the subject of numerous accounts in the press, both in France and abroad.

The subject of priest-workmen is thus once again brought up before public opinion, and this time more seriously and on a more solid basis than in 1949. M. Cesbron's novel, in particular, provides valuable evidence, but on account of its being both a novel and a document, in which reality is interwoven with the imaginary, there is a danger of confusion and error. In certain cases such confusion and error have already occurred. For this reason it seems useful to present a picture of the present position of priest-workmen in France and to set in clear relief some of the essential aspects of their mission, having regard to the discussions aroused by M. Cesbron's book.

1. THE PRIEST-WORKMAN'S POSITION

We shall not revert here to the circumstances which underlie the origin of the priest-workman. The dechristianisation of the workers' milieu is now a recognised fact. Nor shall we give a general picture of the 'missionary' movement in France. We shall confine ourselves to the subject of priest-workmen.

How many are there? They are generally believed to be much more numerous than is actually the case. Moreover, all sorts of experiments which do not come within the scope of the priest-workmen are included under this heading. When André Billy wrote in the *Figaro* of April 16th that 'M. Cesbron has studied only one case among a thousand others', it was a curious exaggeration; in actual fact the present total of priest-workmen does not amount to one hundred.

Within the limits of the general conception of priest-workmen, several forms of apostolate must be distinguished.

(A) *The Paris Mission*

This is the form most widely known. The Paris Mission was founded on July 1st, 1943. It was the work of Cardinal

Suhard who studied its bases and decided upon the form it should take. It was also the work of M. l'Abbé Godin, who died immediately after the month of study and investigation for the perfecting of the Paris Mission which was held at Lisieux, December 1943-January 1944. The priests of the Paris Mission at present number twenty-five, eighteen of whom are manual workers: factory workers in the metallurgical and automobile industries, lorry workers at the Halles or in road transport, electricity and chemical products workers. Certain priests are concerned with particular sectors, such as scientific research or prostitution. They live in working-class districts of Paris or in the suburbs (Montreuil, Billancourt, etc.), and often in small groups.

(B) *In the Provinces*

Including Paris, there are priest-workmen at the present times in a dozen dioceses: Lille, Nancy, Paris, Autun, Lyons, Limoges, Bordeaux, Toulouse, Marseilles, Chambéry, Tarentaise, Maurienne. In the last three dioceses there are priests working on the dams. Some dioceses number two, others about ten; they are never isolated, and are in close contact with their bishop. This diocesan character is becoming more and more marked.

(C) *Several Religious Orders* include some priest-workmen among their members: Jesuits, Capuchins (Nanterre), Franciscans, Dominicans (Paris, Lille, Marseilles). Altogether about twenty of the hundred priest-workmen mentioned belong to religious orders.

(D) *The Little Brothers of the Sacred Heart*

The case of the Little Brothers of Père de Foucauld stands in a category apart. In the majority of cases they are religious, but not priests. They are to be found in France, in the Sahara or the Near East. They live in fraternities of from five to seven brothers; they adopt the conditions of life of their particular time and place. As far as the priest-workmen are concerned, it must be emphasised that the Little Brothers are religious, and they work in factories as the Trappists work in their monasteries, rooted in a contemplative life.

(E) *Curate-workmen*

By this phrase are meant priests who work in a factory while still attached to the parish where they are curates. Such a case is not very frequent but is to be found in several large towns. It is an attempt to solve the problem of the relations between the parish and the mission to the workers. (Bobigny, Colombes, Marseilles.) The case may be compared with that of a certain number of priests in rural parishes who share in the agricultural labour as seasonal workers or even throughout the year.

(F) *A few priests of the Mission of the Sea*, which is concerned with the welfare of sailors, go to sea and lead a sailor's life in its entirety. They are very few in number.

Thus priest-workmen properly so-called are those who take upon themselves the life of the worker in its entirety. It is not a question of substitutes for a time or of trainees. The vocation of the Little Brother of the Sacred Heart is manifestly different, but even when it is limited, as it must be, in this way, the conception of the priest-workman includes every kind of variety, as will be seen.

II. PREACHING OR PRESENCE?

To understand the attitude of P. Pierre, the hero of Cesbron's novel, and the work of priest-workmen in general, one must go back to realities. At the base of it all is the discovery of a world of men who no longer have any spiritual link with the Church, a world which does not just represent an insignificant particle of the earth's inhabitants, but the whole of the world which industrial civilisation has brought into bondage in every clime and in all countries.

Now this world is an atheistic world; not even a dechristianised world, for it has never been Christian, but really and truly an atheistic world: the world of the factory, essentially, but also the world of scientific research. Such a world was formed in the hey-day of liberalism, knowing nothing of any concern for religion. Moreover, such a world must not be confused with the world of Communism, as one is sometimes too easily apt to confuse it. It was already atheistic before Communism came into it and in some sort supplied it with a philosophy. Between such a world and that which the Church still reaches there is no point of contact.

This discovery of an atheistic world, a discovery which scarcely goes back further than the years 1941-1942, is indeed the event of capital importance which is at the root of all missionary effort in France and more particularly at the root of the experiment and endeavour of the priest-workmen. It is only when one has come face to face with the reality that one is able to envisage solutions.

What is to be done in the face of a situation like this? Some people regard the priest-workmen as a kind of specialised missionaries; they go and preach in working-class districts just as others go and preach in bourgeois or rural districts. Such an apostolate would obviously imply a very special adaptation, but the difference would remain one of method. Without denying that action of this sort might be undertaken, and effectively undertaken, in certain particular cases, the priest-workmen as a whole rely more, it would seem, for their evangelisation of this atheistic world on time, history and what can be built up, than on the individual word; it is not only necessary to transform certain individuals, it is essential to transform the milieu itself.

A comparison with the work of Père de Foucauld will best enable us to understand the problem, despite all that differentiates this atheistic world from Islam. Père de Foucauld did not envisage an immediate evangelisation; he first sought to establish a contact and ensure a presence, that of Christ. This is neither a defeatist attitude, nor an accommodation; it is a necessity. Under present conditions it would not seem that there is any other solution open to priest-workmen. That such an attitude involves risks, nobody would care to deny. Should the venture be given up or the risks taken? Some writers favour the first solution; François Mauriac, on the contrary, is of opinion that the risk should be run. (In *Figaro*, April 1, 1952.)

III. FACTORY OR DISTRICT?

The activity of the priest-workmen moves between two poles: the factory and the district. It is rare that those who work in a factory do not come into contact with the problems of the district; equally rare that those living in a district do not come to work in a factory. Most of the experiments are made within these two territories, but they are

distinctly different according to whether the emphasis is laid on the factory or on the district.

The priest-workman who exercises a territorial apostolate is necessarily much more in contact with the parish; and if this contact is difficult, he is led to form a kind of small parish for himself in the form of the community around him. The factory as such presents a field which is completely non-Christian and totally unreached by the Church; the priest working there finds himself much more isolated and his external action will always be less visible. In such a milieu the presence of a priest is the sole means of re-establishing contact between the Church and the people, but it is obvious, too, that in such an atmosphere, at any rate at the beginning, the priest cannot express himself in sacramental acts for they would not be understood even in the smallest degree.

IV. THEIR PLACE IN THE CHURCH

Through the very fact of speaking of the priest-workmen as a vanguard, there is a tendency to isolate them from the rest of the Church. In M. Cesbron's novel *P. Pierre* is actually removed by his archbishop just when the leader of the Communist cell sees his own functions withdrawn. Certain newspapers have not been slow to harp upon the lack of understanding from which he suffers (cf. *G. G. in Paris-Presse*, March 14, 1952); and some, e.g., *Franc-Tireur* (April 3, 1952) insist on opposing the priest-workmen to the official Church.

It is no doubt true that what they undertake is not always understood, and that they are sometimes torn between the demands of their total participation in the condition of the workers and the requirements of ecclesiastical discipline. Such a double loyalty is not always easy: really to share in the life of the workers and to remain in living and intimate communion with the Church and with those who, in the Church, are responsible for truth and authority. But one must be careful not to make a general rule of what may be a personal drama: as if a trench separated priest-workers from the rest of the Church. In point of fact in every diocese concerned, they are in close contact with their bishops. At the close of a recent meeting between some of these priests

and their bishops, the bishops were anxious that it should be known how deeply the meeting had kindled in them anew the 'profound realisation both of the gravity of the problem before the Church and of the fatherly and trusting love merited by those who have dedicated their priestly life to it in a sincere and complete disinterestedness'. Afterwards they emphasised the affection which they bore them 'and the love which, with them and in them, they have for this world of workers to which such priests are consecrated by devotion and by their mission'.

Thus priest-workers are not free-lances cut off from their chiefs or their brothers; neither are they, as some have written, apostles of a new form of evangelism or of a new Christianity. Such expressions are unfortunate, for they tend to make people believe that fundamental modifications are in question, whereas it is merely a particular endeavour to deal with a particular problem. We have never heard priest-workers claim that the modality they have chosen is *the* modality of tomorrow. Obviously this form of apostolate involves problems of collaboration with existing parishes.

No one knows what will take place tomorrow. In the present condition of things, the two modalities correspond to two necessities, each of an entirely different order. Gilbert Cesbron in his novel, even if he has slightly caricatured the traditional parish, has not sought to pronounce for one rather than the other.

V. COLLABORATION

Here we touch on one of the most difficult problems raised by the position of the priest-workmen, one brought into prominence by Gilbert Cesbron's novel. P. Pierre is, in point of fact, asked to participate in the Peace Movement. He agrees to circulate lists of signatures. If the novel had shown us more of him at the factory, we should no doubt have seen him joining the syndicate and perhaps even taking some responsibility in it.

None of the comments which have so far appeared on this novel have touched on this question. If we do so, very rapidly, it is because it is in actual fact one of the most difficult problems.

Some think that by active participation in syndical or political action the priest-worker goes beyond his mission. His objective is not the overthrow of capitalism, nor is it the forwarding of the workers' cause; he must be simply one of the others and among the others, but he is not called upon to take the lead in workers' activities. In acting thus, it may be wondered if he does not fulfil the task of a militant layman in Catholic Action and if he is not in some degree falling into clericalism. Others think that, since he is in a workers' milieu, the priest-worker cannot, because he is a priest, be other than an active and, if need be, a militant worker. His syndical or political allegiance is supported by apostolic reasons; if one embraces the condition of a worker one must do so wholeheartedly. As to the responsibilities which certain priest-workmen assume in these fields, they do not seem to derive directly from principles; they are found in the normal extension of their action, not as something supplementary which could be omitted, but as a consequence which is inevitable at a given moment. How could one be disinterested as to the lot of a class which one has made one's own, and, more precisely, indifferent to improvements which it is essential to work for? If the priest-worker finds himself the most fit person to lead such or such a struggle, has he the right to be disinterested? For him the active struggle for social justice comes from the demands of charity which is at the very root of his activity.

CONCLUSIONS

What does all this lead to, it will be asked? Nothing is more difficult than to arrive at a firm judgment in such a sphere. Gilbert Cesbron in his novel gives a good description of the change which can take place:

The fresh confidence of men in each other, mutual help, reconciliations, the unity which up to now has been found only in the political struggle. . . . Almost every evening they drop in on one or the other, first of all talking about politics or the syndicate—old habits persist!—but when Pierre talks of other things, he's listened to in a different spirit. There's one new dweller at Sagny—Christ. . . . What's wanted is to be with them, continually, in the work at its hardest and at closest quarters. . . .

As P. Pierre says to his archbishop in the dramatic conversation at the book's close, what the men see is the Gospel lived; 'the neighbourhood begins to stir'. It must not be forgotten that the experiments of the priest-workmen are still few and far between: barely a hundred of them for seven or eight millions of the proletariat; and, moreover, they are still very new; those longest at the work have only been going for five years—a very short time to get to know a milieu. It does not seem possible at this juncture to set down the theory of an attempt inspired before all else by what might be called apostolic anguish. How is it possible to say what one can do or what one should do? How are the rules to be determined? The priest-workmen are witnesses searching out, for the future, the touchstones of grace in this atheistic milieu.

Some people have perhaps allowed themselves to be carried away by a kind of romanticism. For Epinal, the priest-workman has taken the place of the missionary setting out to baptise the pagan black peoples of Africa. In reality, even if it does provide material for a novel, the life of the priest-workman has nothing romantic about it. It is a hard life, spiritually and physically; if on the external plane it is not subjected to certain customs or a certain traditional framework, in actual fact it springs from demands and rules which are all the more rigorous.

(From documentation supplied by the *Centre d'Information Catholique*; translated and adapted by K.P.)



ISAAC

Behind the tent-flap Sara laughed,
Thinking their guest was kind, if daft.
But Abraham and all time after
Echo the barren woman's laughter.

B.W.