

## MARTYR OF CHARITY

By DONALD NICHOLL

IN September 1931, a young priest entered the Carmelite Monastery at Lille, which is under the patronage of the Little Flower. It was a month of stirring events in the world of high finance and politics, for the question of the gold standard was throwing the money-markets into confusion and unemployment was kindling the flames of class-hatred. The British Association was in session at the time, listening amongst other things to a broad-sweeping address from General Smuts, an address in which he painted his holistic Deity on a canvas large enough even for the views of his audience. To the thousands who began their day on a diet of bacon and egg and *The Times*, it must have seemed that Wall Street and General Smuts were dealing with the vital issues of the moment; and if, by some chance, they had come to hear of the young priest's joining the Carmelites they would have dubbed it 'escapism'. But it was not fear which inspired the young priest as he began the Introit for the day, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, *Nos autem gloriari oportet in Cruce Domini nostri Jesu Christi. . . .*; his heart was overflowing with love for Christ and his Cross and the slow tread of the Calvary-Mass sounded more clearly in his ears than all the ticker-tape in creation.

Fourteen years later, on the 2nd June, 1945, the columns of *The Times* were still full of the same urgent concerns as in 1931, the war in Indo-China, the onslaught upon Japan and, above all, the momentous decisions which the United Nations were taking at San Francisco. The young priest might have received the news of the day with a twinkle in his deep-set eyes if only he had known of it, but he was now too close to death for the noise of the world to reach him. He was dying, so far-spent that he could not join with Holy Mother Church as she moved into the Gradual for the day, *Juxta est Dominus his qui tribulati sunt corde: et humile spiritu salvabit*. The Church was claiming one of her noblest sons as he completed that Exaltation of the Holy Cross which he had begun so many years ago. It was at Linz in Austria; Père Jacques would see his native Normandy no more.

The story of this 'modern Jesus', as one of his acquaintances does not hesitate to describe him, is beautifully told by P. Philippe de la Trinité, O.C.D. in his *Père Jacques, Martyr de la Charité*.<sup>1</sup> The book is beautiful because its subject is beautiful, and because the author has had the rare good sense to allow the every-day folk who felt Père Jacques's radiance to tell of his love; they do so simply, without affectation, and so they produce an account of sanctity which through its plain, matter-of-fact evidence is reminiscent of the Gospels themselves. No short article could hope to present the hero of this book with anything like the fulness he deserves, because he was such a many-sided person, a Carmelite above all but also a social reformer, an educationist, a leader of men and a lover of human things, of children, of good writing, of the most modern art. Yet there may be value in such an article if it shows that the 'Little Way' leads to Calvary, and if it provides a glimpse of this rough-hewn and impetuous foot-soldier of Christ as he slogged away through the Nazi concentration camps, every step a further torture, every moment a fresh offering to the heavenly Father.

A few dates may help to provide the framework for what are bound to be scattered observations. Père Jacques was born at Barentin (Seine Inférieure) on 29th January, 1900; his parents were working-class folk who made considerable sacrifices to send him to the Seminary at Rouen, where he studied from 1912 until 1924, with a break from 1920-1922 for military service. Ordained priest in 1925, he taught at Saint-Joseph, Le Havre, until 1931, when he became a Carmelite. After making his final vows in 1935 he became the founder and director of the novel Carmelite experiment, the College of St Thérèse de Lisieux at Avon. His period at Avon was brought to an end in January 1944, when the Gestapo arrested him for sheltering young Jews and for his part in the Resistance Movement. The Gestapo took him to the prison at Fontainebleau and then to the camp at Compiègne; in March of 1944 he was bundled into trucks with other first-rank enemies of Nazidom (almost all of them communists) and transferred to Sarrebruck, where for a month he was subjected along with his comrades to the most ghastly treatment the unhinged S.S. minds could devise. It is difficult to understand how Père Jacques and one or two others managed to survive Sarrebruck, but survive

<sup>1</sup> *Études Carmelitaines*.

they did, and towards the end of April he was sent to Mauthausen. The year at Mauthausen represents the consummation of Père Jacques's sacrifice, for the American liberation came too late to save his health (May 1945), and a month later he was dead. Shortly before his release he had written the following words upon an odd scrap of paper, *Per crucem ad lucem. Sine sanguine non fit redemptio—qui facit veritatem venit ad lucem*; every moment of his life is a commentary upon this text, and it is in the light of these words and in the light of the cross which they signify that the subsequent paragraphs need to be read.

It is the paradox of Père Jacques's life, the inherent paradox of Christianity, that he chose obscurity yet became a witness to the light, that he learnt strength and asceticism from a little Norman girl who knew nothing about the great world outside her cloister, and that this same asceticism enabled him to retain his dignity as a human being, whilst men who had been toughened by the ruthless twentieth century snapped like rotten sticks under the horrors of the Nazi camps. For there can be no doubt that the secret of his endurance is to be found in those hidden years when the statesmen were trying to master each other and he was mastering himself. Mastering oneself is never an easy task, and it was more than usually difficult for someone so violent, and even pig-headed, as Père Jacques. This is the very reason why his life is such an inspiration, that the reader can find almost all of his own faults reflected in Père Jacques. Here are some of the comments which have been made upon him by those who knew him during his adolescence in the seminary at Rouen: 'He was strong-willed to the point of fierceness. . . . he was endowed with rich natural gifts, but long and painful struggles must have been necessary before he could master the defects of his disposition, his pride and his obstinacy'. 'During the vacations his wild curiosity did not jibe at any kind of reading—in those days he was no more worried about the Church's index than about his master's advice.' Twenty years later he was still wrestling with the same ardent disposition, and it is obvious from Père Bruno's account of the college at Avon that life could be distinctly uncomfortable when it was lived in proximity to Père Jacques. For example, a pious young boy came up to him one day and said, 'Père Jacques, I made my communion for you today', to be met with the reply, 'Off with you! I don't need your communions.' In many respects he reminds one of Fr Vincent

McNabb: the same shudder which goes through many Englishmen at the memory of Fr Vincent kissing an Anglican bishop's feet was experienced by the good Carmelites when their dear brother used to pour out his generous soul to them, when he used to prostrate himself after having 'put his foot in it again'. In other men it would have been extravagance, but extraordinary natures require extraordinary discipline and his was no ordinary nature.

The extraordinary discipline in his case was the 'Little Way' of St Teresa. His life-long devotion to her finds a parallel only in her life-long devotion to him, for the inspiration and protection which St Teresa afforded him are just as clearly written in this book as the date of his birth or of his death. His humility in face of the Little Flower is vividly illustrated in his correspondence with Mother Agnes of Jesus, sister of St Teresa and Prioress of the Lisieux Carmel. On several occasions he asked for relics of the saint, he took pilgrimages to Lisieux and, above all, he asked her to teach him the secret of becoming a living flame of love for God. To Mother Agnes he wrote, 'Would you be so kind as to ask your holy little sister to allow me an ever-deepening appreciation and understanding of her teaching? It is a rich mine of instruction and counsels which reveal the very heart of Christianity.' He lived under her patronage in the Carmel at Lille, and in the college at Avon, so that it almost became second nature for him to ask her aid, and he began each day as she did by offering himself as a holocaust for the divine love. A striking instance of his straightforward, almost casual, awareness of her protection occurred when he was coming into Mauthausen. He said, 'Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus, I am now coming into this camp and I leave the kind of reception I get entirely to you, but I should be very pleased to receive some sign that you are being received into this camp and that you are protecting me'. Scarcely had he entered the camp than he was greeted by a zealous Catholic, M. Henri Bousset, who introduced him to the Catholics of the place and outlined their needs. Père Jacques and the Little Flower were united in Christ for the journey towards the last Station.

The point about this last Station is that there are thirteen other Stations before it; Père Jacques never shirked any of them. He loved each one of them, he loved the Cross, he loved life and he married himself with death, but the years were long years and it

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was all foot-slogging; he put one foot in front of the other knowing that the sweat would end only with death itself. Perhaps that is why the Little Way appealed to his profoundly sceptical nature; you can't 'kid' yourself about the Little Way. You may deceive yourself into believing that you are at the summit of Mount Carmel if you can read St John of the Cross in the original, if you are thrilled by the beauty of '*Llama de amor viva*', but it is the job straight in front of your nose that St Teresa tells you to get on with, and very often there is no thrill in it. In 1928, for example, before he became a Carmelite, Père Jacques used to run a troop of scouts, who wanted to go to England for their camping holiday but had nothing like sufficient funds. The young priest, who was a great student, had laboriously scraped together a sizeable library; he sold the entire library so that his boys could go to England. There is something direct, manly, and defying cynicism, in such an action; it puts us to shame when we remember the ease with which we sign petitions in favour of food, clothes or books for refugees without being prepared for either hunger or cold or empty book-shelves. But that was typical of Père Jacques, who knew no more about sanctity-formulae than anyone else, whose only distinction was that he tried them, and in full measure. He did without sleep, he used to stand upright whilst he was marking his pupils' papers or else he used to kneel down; either position satisfied him so long as it was uncomfortable; he did without food, he did without warmth. This was just the beginning, of course, since what he was really trying to give up was his own will, but, fortunately, he had never adopted that modern notion that the will is the first thing that can be given up and that the rest can be left to look after itself. This modern notion is flight and Père Jacques was no aviator—he was an infantry man. Consequently, when it came to the concentration camps, where so many men found themselves defenceless, he still held that weapon which he had cherished on the long march, his own cross. One of his companions at Mauthausen, M. de Bonard, recounts how the Carmelite trained his weaker brethren in the use of this weapon. M. de Bonard told Père Jacques that under the weight of his suffering he had promised to God that if he were delivered from his present torments he would go to Lourdes, that he would even make his communion twice a week for the rest of his life. There was a long pause before the priest replied, 'No. You mustn't

tempt God. The greatest proof you can offer of your confidence in God is to accept his will now, whatever it may be.'

Clearly there is no space here for a detailed account of this holy man's life in the concentration camps, of the daily sacrifice of food and clothing to those who needed them perhaps more, of the dramatic moments of a clandestine Mass; or of that general absolution spoken through a window to six hundred dying men of all nationalities who stumbled through the *Confiteor* each in his own language. It requires all the 150 pages which P. Philippe devotes to this period in order to give the least impression of its heroic quality, and one has to be content with P. Riquet's summing-up, 'At Mauthausen, as at Compiègne, Père Jacques was undeniably the most radiant, the most loved, the most evangelical of all the witnesses to Christ'. Yet the impact of Père Jacques' forceful personality was both felt and welcomed by one set of men in particular who seem to receive little love from Catholics these days — the communists. Nothing would pain him more, were he alive, than the way in which Catholics and communists who fought side by side against the tyranny of Nazism have fallen into the bitterest enmity towards each other; therefore it may be regarded as a work of piety to single out his relations with communists.

One feature which Père Jacques fully shared with his communist friends was a hatred of everything bourgeois. Such a statement has to be interpreted, of course, in the sense that bourgeois signifies a type of human behaviour and not an economic class, for Père Jacques hated mediocrity and flabbiness and lip-service no matter what the economic status of the perpetrator. In other words, he was enough of a Christian to shock the bourgeois, and shock them he certainly did. During the early years of his priesthood he preached a sermon on money which led the mealy-mouthed in the congregation to exclaim, 'He talks just like a communist', and to request that he should never be allowed to preach in their parish again. On another occasion he raised a similar storm by a sermon which began, 'I am a worker, the son of a worker; I am here to talk about Christ the worker'; living with a saint was a perpetual strain on their consciences; they would have preferred someone nice and respectable. Perhaps Père Jacques had such people in mind when he referred to those '*qui se servent du bon Dieu comme on se sert de bonbons sucrés*'.

Even shocking the bourgeois, however, was a waste of time when he could be busied in loving the communists, and from P. Philippe we get a charming glimpse of the good priest's relations with two communists who were his army-comrades during the winter of the 'phoney' war. These two used to harangue Père Jacques for hours on end with speeches about the messianic age to come, and the gay Carmelite would go so far with them that he seemed to be on their side, then suddenly he would point out that what they were really thirsting for was the love of God. He found more love of God in these restless souls than in many of the *bien-pensants*. But they were not to be converted; they just exclaimed despairingly, 'What a waste! he's just the kind of man that we could do with'. One of them, indeed, became so friendly that he appointed himself Père Jacques's right-hand man in preparing a room for Midnight Mass and the Christmas celebrations; he was proud to have made the place fit for the great feast, he wished everyone a 'Happy Christmas'. A little longer and he would have been serving Mass.

The circumstances in which Père Jacques renewed his acquaintances with communists were less idyllic, but the impression which he produced upon them through his burning love for souls was even greater. It was during the course of his famous conferences at Compiègne in 1944 when he obtained permission to give instruction on the catechism to any one who cared to listen. The conferences took place in the camp chapel at 10 o'clock at night, and by half-past nine there was not a place vacant in the whole room; the most faithful attenders were the communists, who listened silently and admiringly as this great apostle of the truth expounded Catholic teaching upon every subject under the sun, from the social teaching of the Church to the preciousness of virginity. The brilliant success of Père Jacques in Compiègne was sufficient to endear him to the communists, who would have gladly risked their own lives for his sake, but even now he had not fully revealed to them his pure love of mankind—he was to go with them through the furnace of Sarrebruck.

Sarrebruck defies description. That even the toughest men were broken on its wheel of suffering need occasion no surprise; that some should have survived it is sufficient to make them objects of our admiration; but that anyone in the midst of the blows and torture, the starvation and cold, should have still retained a

thought for any skin but his own. . . . this would be incredible unless God had been shaping him for it since the beginning of his life. Such a man was this martyr of charity. There was an 'infirmary' in the camp where some fifty living skeletons were dragging out their last hours in the stench of dysentery; covered with vermin and abandoned by all, they can have hoped for nothing better than to follow their fellows whom the S.S. used to drown in a pond at the centre of the camp. When Père Jacques saw them he saw Christ; he stuck out his obstinate head and took all the blows that were coming to him for insisting upon helping these wretched men; his tenacity gained him admiration even from the brutal commandant, Hornetz, who gave him the added job of looking after the 'infirmary'. Every day he swilled the room; he washed the sick men with his own hands, he washed shirts and tore them up for bandages, he even scraped up the S.S. men's leavings from their plates in order to afford some extra nourishment for his charges. What warmth he brought into those chilled souls through his fervent love of God will only be known at the Last Day. The person who assisted him in this work was his good communist comrade, Nicolot. It would be well for contemporary Catholics to meditate upon that camp in Sarrebruck during April 1944, when the Carmelite and his comrade of the Left spent their days tending the wounds of Christ.

No one who had witnessed Père Jacques's utter abandonment of himself at Sarrebruck would have refused him entry into their hearts, and the communists henceforward were to treat him as one of their own. They had scarcely set foot inside Mauthausen before room was made for him on the small committee of the French *résistance*, and for the rest of his time there he worked in the closest collaboration with the communist leaders. His behaviour did not go uncriticised, of course, and some of the Polish Catholics raised against him a cry which he had already heard in his home diocese long years ago, 'He is a communist'. The answer to that one had been given by his Master two thousand years before, and it was his Master whom he echoed when he replied, 'The preaching of the Gospel is not for those who are of the household but for those who have to be brought in.' That Père Jacques, if he had lived, would have brought many of them in can scarcely be doubted; he had won their hearts, they elected him president of the camp's French committee when the American



forces liberated them, and he joyously promised to make them the subject of his first sermons at Notre-Dame if he were allowed to do so by his superiors. But Père Jacques did not live; his great mentor, the Little Flower, had said that in the evening of life the only thing that counts is love, and he himself had shown that great love is the way to bring evening upon one's life. It would be his dying prayer that we might love the communists with all our hearts.

When all this has been said, however, there remain many facets of his personality which have gone unmentioned: his enthusiasm for Pascal, for Rimbaud and Baudelaire, his intellectualism, the energy which he threw into sport and, above all, the fine discipline which he inspired in his pupils at Avon. But we must mention at least one question to which his life gives the answer and which has been engaging much attention since the publication of Père Perrin's 'Priest-Workman'; that is, should a priest become a workman? does he need to go to the bench or to the foundry before he can be an effective priest? Père Jacques wrote the answer with his blood; he showed that a priest, as such, is a workman in the human spirit; he both summed up the work of his peasant forefathers and pointed to the destiny of future priests when he said, 'That's my job—suffering'.



*O Sacerdos, quis es tu?  
 Non es a te, quia de nihilo  
 Non es ad te, quia mediator hominum  
 Non es tibi, quia sponsus Ecclesiae  
 Non es tui, quia servus omnium  
 Non es tu, quia Deus es  
 Quis ergo es tu? Nihil et omnia.*

—St Norbert.