

# The Case of the Abbé Barreau <sup>349</sup>

## by Louis Allen

If I were very irreverent, and had thoughts only of a world from which Coco Chanel and Maurice Chevalier have disappeared, I'm not sure I ought to take with desperate seriousness the defection of one young clergyman from the ranks of Parisian ecclesiastics. Or is this being frivolous? In a sense, it is, because although there is something banal about the way in which the press here or in France seizes upon the marriage of a priest for a ready headline, Barreau is not just any priest. His origins, for one thing, were most unusual in a candidate for the priesthood. His parents were atheists, with those Freemasonry connections which make French Catholic hair stand on end in a Pavlovian instant; in fact his grandfather was *chef de cabinet* to Combes, whose anti-religious education laws under the Third Republic in the early years of this century drove the religious orders—for a time—out of French education. To cap it all, his great-grandfather was a *communard*, shot by the Versaillais. All in all, the number of tongues that wagged with I-told-you-so's and what-can-you-expect's must have been pretty considerable when Barreau announced his intention to marry one of his parishioners. But he had come to the Church the hard way. His education at the lycée Condorcet and then his studies in law at the University can have done nothing other than confirm him in the dry positivism which characterizes a good many French agnostics. For Barreau, though, there was the Christianity of the personal encounter which made all the difference. His history teacher at Condorcet was Olivier Clément, whose person and example converted him to Christianity. Not that Clément preached at his pupils. But what Barreau learned from him of the true nature of the real evangelical message—'subversion, scandal, madness to the world'—showed him that he had been content to dismiss what was merely a caricatured Christianity, itself dechristianized.

Like thousands of his generation—he is thirty-eight—he went through the war in Algeria, from 1955 to 1957, and received the rude shock of finding that, as a socialist, he was helping to run an old-fashioned colonialist war on behalf of a socialist government. He did not rebel against this, but the experience brought him to 'the limits of disobedience'. In 1960, he was ordained priest, and began to work in the district of Pigalle which he had known as a child, founding an organization for the children of the area who—then as now—were being brought up on the streets. TVAS it was called, from the initials of the four *quartiers* of Paris which made it up: Trinité, Vintimille, Anvers, Sacré-Coeur. TVAS was his way of making contact with the young, whom he chatted up in *bistrots*, or met on his glossy motor-bike, to show them he could sympathize with ambitions very close to their own.

He was noticed by Mgr Veillot, the Archbishop of Paris, who obviously must have felt that here was the image of the new, young French priest of the following generation. Veillot turned him into the whizzkid of the Paris clergy. He was made parish priest of—of all places—the wealthy bourgeois parish of Saint-Honoré-d'Eylau, where he began to work with students, and to organize a new catechetical course for adults preparing for baptism. The work was arduous, but he found time to write two books for the Editions du Seuil, both of which became best-sellers, *La Foi d'un Païen* and *Qui est Dieu?* He lectured in most of the big cities in France, but not, his listeners of the time remember, in a revolutionary or even 'contestatory' sense. The morality you derived from listening to him was vague, a pot-pourri of advice on daily behaviour, but nothing more.

When the rumours started that he was about to get married, he decided to remove himself from Paris for a while and went off to Afghanistan in a Land-Rover with some friends. But there was no question of hushing the matter up. He was a priest too much in the public eye for that, and also, in his own opinion, he perhaps had a duty to say and do rather more than merely resign his post, since he thought hundreds of his fellow priests might be in situations similar to his own, but without his ready access to the media of information. In a circular to friends, and a note to some of the French bishops, he said quite simply: 'I'm going to get married'. No crisis was involved, he added, no bitterness or sense of unease, and his faith was total and intact.

He had accepted celibacy through obedience, not through vocation, because there was no other way of being a priest. He gave a long interview in *L'Express* (4th October, 1971) in which he affirmed that the issue of celibacy was a secondary one in a world in which Christianity no longer spoke to anyone, and had reduced itself to an organization which gave good advice but was listened to by nobody. He had lived with celibacy for ten years, peacefully and honestly, but his views on celibacy had not changed in that time. Secondary though it was, it was nonetheless a significant problem because it raised the question of the existence not of the priest but of the idea of 'clergy'. The primitive Church had no clergy. Its ministers were the emanation of their local community and were almost all married. There had occurred in the Middle Ages a kind of passing over of the ministerial function into the hands of monks, because they were the only educated people of their day; that is where the idea of obligatory celibacy arose, and it was only universally accepted in the seventeenth century and even then not completely: Bossuet lived *en concubinage* (an affirmation promptly denied by a later correspondent as a historical fable refuted more than a century ago by Cardinal de Bausset in his life of Bossuet).

The rise of a caste of ecclesiastical civil servants cut the Christian clergy off from community with its base in the people. Perhaps this

was necessary in the pansexual atmosphere of the Renaissance but at the moment it has a negative result: the priest is isolated by the obligation to be celibate and by being forbidden to work. Vatican II's desire to see a renewal of a missionary priesthood deeply involved in the work of the world was bound to lead to a questioning of celibacy, because the two notions were closely linked. In a sense, the ultra right-wing reactionaries of the Church (*intégristes*) were right when they defended the institutional nature of the Church even against the inspiration of faith, because the chain reaction they foresaw did in fact take place. When a thirty-year-old priest lives his daily life in contact with working men and women and has not the *gift* of celibacy, then he begins to question why he should not marry and his obligation not to marry becomes unbearable—in fact the Church now demands a heroism which was not necessarily implicit thirty years ago, or before, in the imposition of celibacy.

I remain in the Church, the abbé Barreau declared, but I cannot exercise my ministry, because the Vatican refuses to accept the notion of married priests. Too many taboos are involved. Yet the early Church was the great liberator of women, whom it put on an equal footing with men in many ways: 'Jesus was extraordinarily feminist'. And Christianity's great success in European society was precisely in that age, the thirteenth century, which was the most feminist epoch in the whole history of mankind, and the most democratic. Then power and order began to take over once again. In fact that is the history of Christianity in a nutshell: the struggle between the subversiveness of the Gospel message and the endless recovery of power by religious means—in other words, the paganization of Christianity: 'Constantine only became a Christian when Christianity had ceased to be Christian.' The profoundly misogynist-antifeminist society of the Mediterranean, the society of the harem, became the ethos of Christianity.

But the abbé Barreau was prepared to go even further. If, asked the interviewer, you are prepared to put the question of the marriage of priests, you must also put the question of the divorce of priests. Marriage is a relative institution, like any other institution, was the answer. 'Jesus never promulgated any legislation of indissolubility.' He admits concubinage, as the whole Church did until the seventeenth century. There are things more important than marriage, and for a higher reason a man and woman may separate—you can leave father, mother, children, wife, for 'une raison plus importante'. 'The Church has always reserved to herself the right to dissolve marriages, that's how little absolute she considers marriage, and I do not see why she should not dissolve them, if the failure of a marriage is obvious. She has the power to do so.'

In the matter of celibacy, he claimed, the bishops prefer a principle to reality. They and the Pope have made themselves guilty of sin against the gospel (*péché évangélique*) and they will be responsible

for that to God. 'I like the Pope', he went on, 'and I am subject to him, but he is making a mistake. He prefers a law which is contingent—and he says himself it is contingent—to people. He is wrong in good faith, he is wrong with the deepest honesty, but he is wrong. Let's be done with it. Let priests marry and let's get on with something else, with something that really matters.'

But the interviewer had other doubts. Did the abbé Barreau think the majority of Catholics ('la base', to use Barreau's own term) were behind him in this? No, was the frank and candid answer. The majority of Christian people are not yet ready for it.

Didn't this, the interviewer gently nudged, go some way to explaining the prudence of the hierarchy in this matter? He respected the arguments derived from pastoral prudence, Barreau replied, but he simply didn't want the way to be barred for ever by statements which simply said, 'No change, now or at any other time.' 'If they would only say "We can do nothing for you now, but wait five or six years and there might be a ministry available"', how much that would make the mentality of the Christian people develop!

Will the Church die if nothing changes, asked the interviewer? The affirmation was beautifully clear: 'No, the Church will not die. She is very resistant. If she were ever going to die, she'd have died fifty times over long ago. But in the Church today men are suffering, and the hierarchy is responsible for that suffering. When an essential problem is involved, when there is a loss of faith, for instance, the Pope and the bishops have the right to conclude: "Well, that man is no longer a Christian." But on this secondary problem, in which faith is not an issue, it is an act of aberration to maintain this discipline.'

The abbé's theology and history are no doubt a little summary and short-winded, as some of his correspondents pointed out. There was a flood of letters after the interview appeared. In the last issue of November 1971, *L'Express* published Barreau's own very interesting collective reply to his correspondents. He distinguished three categories of criticism, one theological, one disciplinary, one dealing with his statements on the Pope.

As far as the first was concerned, he said he did not reduce Jesus to the figure of 'great man', nor did he reduce the gospel message to that of humanism. Through Jesus he felt the call of the Absolute, and not in a vague deistical sense: 'I believe passionately in the God of the Gospels: a surprising God, so different from the idols we usually replace him by.' Christian faith always passes through a fascination with the man Jesus—it does not stop at the human personality of Christ but it is mediated by it.

One of his correspondents had said that the good news was the Resurrection. Of course, he answers, but that is what he meant by saying that death, suffering, misunderstanding, failure, everything that reason shows us to be the very web of our existence is perhaps

not the last word after all. The fundamental Christian word is that death can be conquered by trust in Christ.

On the second issue, that of marriage, perhaps, he thought, speaking into a tape-recorder had allowed his mind to wander in an undisciplined fashion. He had proposed a 'catechumenal concubinage'—by this he meant a patient and serious preparation for marriage. If this went so far as living together, he repeated that Christ himself had considered concubinage 'avec une certaine indulgence' as the lesser evil, and the Church had done likewise. By saying that marriage was not an absolute he was not saying that the commitment of two baptized people who wish to give themselves to each other for ever was not one of the strongest realities of Christianity, compared by Saint Paul to the union of Christ with his Church. That did not mean one should approve of an institution which turned into a prison. The institution was the servant of the commitment, not the other way round. 'The Church has always recognized that she can dissolve marriages as the lesser of two evils. I think the discipline of the Roman Church at present is too severe on divorced persons. You can see well enough that it has been dictated by bachelors.'

Most of those who wrote to him on celibacy brought up the argument of fidelity to his vow. Yes, that is a value, he admits. But what kind of a vow has been made by those who were not given any choice between a celibate ministry or a married ministry? 'And should fidelity be lived at the cost of an absurd and "unliveable" situation?'

Others criticized his daring to say the Pope was wrong. 'I was not appropriating to myself the infallibility', declares the abbé, 'which I do not concede him in his current ministry, though I recognize his authority and power to arbitrate. . . . But I do claim the right to speak freely in a Church in which, in Christ's words, "we are all brothers"'. The failure of the last synod shows that it is time again for Christian people to speak again in a Church which has become "the Church of silence".'