## PERSONAE

### 5. Jacques Loew, O.P.

JACQUES LOEW was born in 1908 at Clermont-Ferrand; he was baptized a Catholic but was sent as a child to a Protestant Sunday school. He studied law, became an advocate at Nice, and was twenty-four when he recovered the Catholic faith which in fact he had never consciously accepted—or rejected. It was, as things turned out, a providential preparation for the work that was to be his: the reconciliation of the workers of Marseilles to the Catholic religion. They, too, could for the most part scarcely be said to have lost the faith, for they had never really known it.

He became a Dominican—and in passing one may recall how much the Order of Preachers throughout its history has owed to converts who have brought to their vocation a personal realization of the problem of presenting the faith to a largely faithless world. In 1939 he was ordained a priest, and soon afterwards he began to work with the *Economie et Humanisme* group at Lyons, who, under the inspiration of Père Lebret, were developing the sociological research which has since played so vital a part in the Church's contemporary mission in France. In 1941 he exchanged the academic study of the Church's difficulties in an industrial society for the hard job of a worker in the Marseilles docks, for he had come to realize that the terrifying gulf between the workers and the Church had to be bridged by methods other than those traditionally associated with parish life. In 1947, although continuing to earn his living as a docker, he was entrusted by the Bishop of Marseilles with a parish, and, with a group of secular priests who shared his conviction of the need for a new apostolate, he established a community which allied manual work to the priest's usual ministry in an attempt to meet that need.

The sad history of the priest-worker experiment in France might seem to have meant the end of Père Loew's work. In fact his position was untouched by it, although he had to submit to the prohibition of manual work for priests (apart from part-time work at home). He had never fallen into the sort of messianism that affected many of the priest-workers, who, as they gradually assumed responsibilities in the trade unions, became deeply involved politically. His training, both as a lawyer and as a priest, had perhaps taught him to make necessary distinctions, and throughout he retained intact the sense of the priest's vocation in the working-class world as that of assuring

the presence of Christ, of accepting suffering in order to redeem it by his shared example. His obedience was absolute, and his letter to the Master General of the Dominican Order in 1954 expresses both his obedience and the strength of his vocation. 'I wish to tell you how glad I am to serve the Church with an obedience which I want to be absolute, but I want, too, to express my confidence that after the storm, and after these necessary decisions have been taken, our mother the Church will allow me and others to study effectively and loyally the ways in which we can bring Jesus Christ to the weak and the poor.'

The decision of Rome to put an end to an experiment could not mean the end of a vocation, and the 'Mission Ouvrière de SS. Pierre et Paul' is the new formulation of the basic work that has been Père Loew's for twenty years. This is a Secular Institute, of priests and laymen, who dedicate themselves 'to preach the Gospel to the world of the workers'. For laymen, it means work in a factory; for priests, ministerial work in that world. And it is only after at least three years that the first vows can be taken. They are renewed annually for three years, and, for the final undertaking to be a member of the Mission Ouvrière, the candidate must be at least thirty years of age and have spent three to five years at work in a factory (or, in the case of priests, in its accompanying ministry). The hope is that some workers will become priests, bringing to their vocation a knowledge from within of the industrial society they long to redeem.

The priest-worker movement failed most of all because its members were untrained. Generous motives proved not to be enough when the trial came for many men who had hoped to find in the movement a means of breaking down the terrible wall of separation between the working world and the Church. And the training, in Père Loew's mind, must be practical, with a personally informed knowledge of what the workers' life really means. But since it is only a true religious vocation that can sustain a way of life that contains at every point the possibility of deep strain, the need for a spiritual foundation is even greater. In his books, and especially in his latest, *Journal d'une Mission Ouvrière*, 1941-1959, Père Loew has revealed a rare combination of sheer realism with a total trust in divine providence. His daily work among the dockers of Marseilles for so many years has taught Père Loew that there can be no easy solutions: to live their life is to realize how infinitely far removed it is from the accepted values of the Church's mission. To implant the Church in the docks of Marseilles, or in any other industrial society, means more than shock tactics. It was here perhaps that the priest-worker

movement was unequipped for the long-term apostolate, for the building up of the Church's traditional function as the place of prayer and sacraments. For that a long and carefully meditated training is absolutely essential.

Father Loew was a priest-worker, and certainly the one above all others who knew the problem and had the spiritual and intellectual, not to speak of the industrial, knowledge to meet it. In the providence of God it may be that the cruel setback of the recent Roman decisions has driven those who know the desperately urgent need for a 'workers' mission' to consider how it can be implemented at a much deeper level than before. A community of men, committed by solemn promise to seek the salvation of the workers, and prepared to undertake the rigorous training such a vocation demands, can hope, in perfect loyalty to the Church, to achieve what the feverish, improvised attempts failed to do. The goodwill of many of the workers is again and again made plain in Father Loew's own testimony: 'you understand us', 'you know our problems', is their common response.

As for Father Loew himself, he seems wholly confident, with the modest but penetrating confidence of the man who has seen not simply a vision but a real world that lies wide open to the Church's perennial mission of love and understanding. He *knows*, and as you hear him speak you realize how deeply those years of exacting toil, and the innumerable links of friendship they created, have marked his mind and heart. He makes no large claims; his expectations are nonetheless without limit, and they are the more impressive stated quietly, with something still of the lawyer's precision, but behind them the boundless trust of a man who has learnt that an apostle is one whom God has sent and who dare not question the meaning of his mission.