

SECOND THOUGHTS ON THE PRIEST-WORKERS

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IN recent times no Catholic subject has attracted such widespread attention as the affair of the priest-workers in France. The various phases of the negotiations between the French Hierarchy and the Vatican were widely reported in the English press; in one week the matter was discussed in a leader in the *Manchester Guardian*, in an article in the *New Statesman* and in a talk on the Third Programme. Some commentators seemed to see in it an attempt by the Church in France to revolt against the dominance of the Vatican, on the principle that if you scratch a French bishop you find a Gallican; others seemed to feel that the episode revealed the Church (in France as elsewhere) in its true colours as anti-worker; others yet again insinuated that a halt had to be called to the desertions that were taking place from the ranks of the priest-workers to the Communists. Yet to appreciate the recent decisions of the French bishops, the priest-workers must be seen in the context of the whole problem of the Church and the workers in France, and of the worker apostolate which existed long before the experiment of the priest-workers was begun. In other words, the directives issued by the Assembly of Cardinals and Archbishops to the leaders of worker Catholic Action in October are as significant as the new instructions regarding the position of priest-workers.

The picture is falsified unless the priest-worker is seen as part of the whole worker apostolate and that against the background of the growth of social Catholicism in France. Broadly speaking, one may say that for the hundred and thirty years from the French Revolution up to the end of the First World War the Church in France was coming to terms with the Republic, with the rise of the bourgeoisie. The nostalgia for the *ancien régime*, for the union of throne and altar, died very hard, and it needed all the authority of Leo XIII to make the traditional French Catholic realise that such a confusion of spiritual and temporal positions was not merely bad history but also impossible theology. That such a spirit was not altogether exorcized was shown by the unhappy episode of *Action Française*, condemned *in petto* by Pius X

and actually by Pius XI. Energies had been harnessed and forces deployed in the nineteenth century not to confront the new industrial civilization that was coming into being but in a desperate attempt to turn back the clock. The result was that the proletarian revolution was well under way before most of the Catholics in France had come to terms with the previous revolution. By that time the breach between the workers and the Church was almost complete. In this new feudal society the aristocrats were the employers, many of them Catholics, and once again in the eyes of the oppressed the Church was identified with 'them'. The new sacred union between Church and Big Business was so much taken for granted by the latter that when Bishop Liénart of Lille took the side of the workers in a dispute with an employers' association in 1928, referred the matter to Rome and gained a decision in favour of the workers, he was ostracized by the employers of Lille, Roubaix and Tourcoing. Significantly, although Lille is a suffragan see, Pius XI gave him the red hat at the next consistory. The breach between the majority of workers and the Church was symbolized by the existence of the Christian Trade Union, the C.F.T.C., and the larger membership of the Socialist, anti-clerical and materialist Union, the C.G.T.

When in 1927 the J.O.C. began in France it was hailed by Pius XI as the answer to the scandal of the nineteenth century: young workers were themselves to be the apostles who would strive to bring the masses back to Christ. In fact a missionary approach, with the missionaries belonging to the masses, was the only possible method to try and christianize the workers' environment and convert the proletariat: the leaven had to be in the lump. The years that passed from the beginnings with a group of seven in the Paris suburb of Clichy to the vast congress in the Parc des Princes in 1936 showed steady growth and influence—at least among working youth. The problem of the adult worker remained.

Cardinal Suhard, much exercised by the millions who were still untouched by the Church, commissioned in 1943 two Jocist chaplains, Fathers Godin and Daniel, to prepare a report on the relations between the Church and the proletariat. The report, accepted by the Cardinal and published under his authority, was the now famous *France, Pays de Mission?* The authors, while still believing in the methods of Catholic Action, felt that they were not enough to make an impact on the ten million persons in

France who were to all intents and purposes heathens. The whole Church, they suggested, should be put on a missionary basis and there should be special priest missionaries. The Cardinal was convinced of this and wrote in his diary: 'For this "missionary Catholic Action" we need dedicated and convinced priests, priests of supreme value—saints. God will not make this a fruitful work unless faithful and responsible priests are employed. The action of the priest is of first importance here: "to be a missionary to pagan people". The need thus arises that he be specially applied to this work outside the Christian community: hence, a special missionary of Christ, wise, apostolic, prepared to reconcile two worlds.' In 1942, a year previous to this report, a seminary had been opened at Lisieux to train priests who would specialize in the apostolate of conversion in the home missions, i.e. for the *Mission de France*. Cardinal Suhard decided to set up the *Mission de Paris*, which would be directed towards the proletariat of Paris. The *Mission de Paris* was launched in January 1944 after a month of prayer and study at the Lisieux seminary, in which Father Godin played a large part. Other bishops followed suit until there were more than a dozen industrial centres throughout France which had their priest-workers. At the same time students who were training for the *Mission de France* spent part of their time working in mines, factories and workshops in preparation for their future apostolate.

From the outset it was recognized that this was an experiment, but that the circumstances were such that the calculated risk had to be taken. While remaining priests they had to identify themselves with the aspirations, with the problems and struggles of the workers. This was the only way in which Christianity could be inserted in a world that was closed to Christ. The most obvious danger was that the identification would become too great, and that where there seemed to be a conflict of loyalties the priest might opt for temporal advantage rather than for spiritual obedience. This experiment began at a time when there was good will for, even collaboration with, the Communists as an aftermath of the joint fight that Christians and Communists had waged in the Resistance. It was the period too when the adult movement of worker Catholic Action was developing, from the old and unsatisfactory L.O.C. (*Ligue Ouvrière Chrétienne*) formula to the new post-war M.P.F. (*Mouvement Populaire des Familles*). Shortly

after the break-up of the Communist-Christian Democrat alliance in 1947 the Communists went over to the offensive, and this presented a cruel dilemma for many militants in the worker apostolate—for it was obvious that the leadership of the working class was in the hands of the Communists. If the lay apostle, or the priest-worker, wished to identify himself with the workers, still more with what seemed to be the current ideologies of the workers' revolution, how far could he go along with the Communists? This was no abstract question, for it cropped up in the daily instances of the workers' life. Should he belong to the C.G.T. which was largely Communist dominated? Should he join in demonstrations or sign petitions for peace which were Communist inspired? If he did he would seem to be following the Communist party line, if he did not he was cutting himself off from the very people whom he hoped to infuse with the spirit of the gospel of Christ. Or again, what should he do when most of his fellow workers were going on strike at the instigation of the C.G.T.? The first, abortive and short-lived, attempt to resolve this dilemma was the movement of the *Chrétiens progressistes*—an *avant-garde* which was so far ahead of the general body of the forces that it lost contact with them altogether. The same dilemma caused a division in the M.P.F. Some of the leaders of this movement came to the conclusion that in order to be effective they would have to involve themselves, and their movement, so much in temporal matters that they could no longer remain part of official mandated Catholic Action. So, in technical language, they returned their mandate to the Hierarchy, ceased to be part of the official lay apostolate of the Church and became the M.L.P. (*Mouvement pour la Libération du Peuple*). The bishops then set up *Action Catholique Ouvrière* whose function is to provide for the spiritual and apostolic training of worker apostles in the Trade Unions, in M.L.P. and in political parties. Finally, to complete a necessarily over-simplified picture, the doctrinal, intellectual and ideological inspiration for many of the left-wing Catholic individuals and groups, came from an organization called '*Jeunesse de l'Église*', led by the Dominican Father Montuclard. The leading idea of this group, expressed in a regular series of booklets, was that we are living in a period between two eras of history. This is an age of transition and of waiting, 'the age of John the Baptist'. The role of the Church and of the apostle is to help on the change

at the temporal level, in effect to support the proletarian revolution, and await the crystallization of a new civilization before attempting the work of evangelization. The old world must pass away, with our assistance, before the work of christianization begins.

This then is the background to the ten years of the apostolate of the priest-workers. Despite efforts on both sides, it was inevitable that there should be friction between them and the established order of things in the Church. It must be said that in all cases the choice of priests made by the bishops for this most delicate work was not always wise. Some priests were appointed by their bishops to this work because they did not fit in anywhere else. In other cases priests were appointed who had been active in the Resistance, and who carried over their maquis mentality to their activity as priest-workers. There were others who had not been in the Resistance, who wished they had been and in compensation tried to make their apostolate into a form of resistance movement. Others who felt that the existing workers' movements were not progressive enough attempted to lead their members further to the left. I myself eighteen months ago was present when a diocesan chaplain of the J.O.C. told his Archbishop quite frankly that if the influence of the priest-workers on his Jocist leaders did not cease, he would be forced to resign.

Further difficulties were created by the excursions of the priest-workers into political and Trade Union matters. A great deal of publicity was given to the two priests who were arrested at the time of the Ridgway demonstrations in Paris in May 1952. But the position was never made clear in the foreign press. First, they were not priest-workers. They were assistant priests in the parish of Petit-Colombes who worked in secular jobs. They took part in the demonstration, but were arrested *afterwards* when they were attending to a man who had been beaten up by the police. They were taken to the police station and were there beaten up by the police, who knew they were priests. They protested publicly in an open letter to the Prefect of Paris, and Cardinal Feltin while remaining discreetly silent about their part in the demonstration supported their protest about the unwarranted brutality of the police. Occasionally priest-workers have been delegates of the C.G.T., causing embarrassment to Catholics. An official of the Catholic union, the C.F.T.C., was nonplussed to find that his

opposite number—advocating a very different line of action—at an arbitration conference was a priest. Pictures of priest-workers as delegates of the C.G.T. on the front pages of *L'Humanité* have not made the situation any easier. This has brought about a double confusion: a confusion of the spiritual and the temporal in the work of a priest, and a confusion arising from yielding to what Cardinal Saliège has called 'the temptation to believe that his essential function is to take the place of a lay leader in the workers' fight'. A new form of clericalism, i.e. the invasion of the sphere proper to the layman by the priest, was in danger of appearing, and this not in ecclesiastical matters but in secular affairs. Twice last year priests attached to the *Mission de Paris* have publicly attacked the leaders of the C.F.T.C., speaking not as priests but as trade unionists.

Perhaps the most disturbing factor of all was the attempt to construct an ideological and theological background to justify even more extreme positions being taken up by the priest-workers and their followers. The group led by Father Montuclard had been the spearhead of this attempt, and the last two years had seen a progressive condemnation by the Church of their views. Their argument can be reduced to three heads: (i) the only philosophy which is immanent in the workers' movement is Marxism; (ii) a distinction must be made between Marxist morality and its atheism—the former can be accepted, even the latter can contribute to human progress; (iii) a clear distinction must be drawn between the Catholic faith and temporal action. Marxism is the science of the liberation of the proletariat, and as such does not conflict with the faith. This view was set out in a publication of *Jeunesse de l'Eglise* entitled '*Les évènements et la foi*' which while containing many true insights upheld the two-phase idea of social reform. In February 1952 the Council of Vigilance of the Archdiocese of Paris protested against these views. In October 1952 the Assembly of Cardinals and Archbishops denounced the doctrinal errors of *Jeunesse de l'Eglise*, especially those concerning the mission of the Church. In March 1953 the book '*Les évènements et la foi*' was placed on the Index by the Holy Office. In October 1953 the Assembly of Cardinals and Archbishops condemned the movement *Jeunesse de l'Eglise* for 'persisting in a spirit of systematic denigration of the Church and for its intolerable pretensions to reform the Church without the Hierarchy', and for 'wishing to

remain faithful to the Church even while resisting it'. While it would be erroneous to suggest any close association between the priest-workers and the doctrinal errors of *Jeunesse de l'Eglise*, it is nevertheless true that many of their defenders—their worst enemies, their friends—did use just such arguments as these. For instance the fortnightly *Quinzaine* published an article on May 1, 1953, justifying the complete commitment of priest-workers to temporal action on the score that the workers' world must be considered as 'a complete human reality', like a nation. And so it should have its own Church—differing from the existing bourgeois church, carrying over none of its traditions which are foreign to the workers' world. The priest-workers would create new communities round them which would be as authentically worker as the Church in Ireland is Irish and in France is French.

Not all the French bishops had the same sympathy or conviction regarding these new missionary enterprises as Cardinal Suhard. The seminary which had begun with such high hopes at Lisieux was transferred, after a long search for a welcome, to Limoges. The irony did not escape those who appreciated the idiomatic significance of 'being sent to Limoges'. Moreover, it is not unfair to say that there were some bishops who were as reactionary as *Quinzaine* was progressive. Errors, false positions, even losses which were part of the calculated risk undertaken by Cardinal Suhard were misunderstood or exaggerated. The situation which faced the Hierarchy in France was most difficult, because the priest-workers and their followers were being held up as the *real* apostolate to the working class in opposition to the official A.C.O. The division was becoming greater every day, to the sorrow of those who were oppressed by the problem of the pagan proletariat, and to the joy of the enemies of the Church.

The first move came after the Assembly of the Cardinals and Archbishops held in mid-October 1953. It was a statement from them to the leaders of the A.C.O. reaffirming their confidence in the lay apostolate, renewing the mandate of A.C.O. for the evangelization of the workers' world, and calling on all priests engaged in this work, whether parochially or extraparochially, to exercise their ministry in a spirit of collaboration and of unity with A.C.O. The meaning of this was clear, as was their warning to the leaders not to allow themselves to be led astray by those who wished to bind the Church to a particular political or

economic regime. They also issued a warning against those who presumed to put a political interpretation on the doctrine or action of the Church, and against the grave error of trying to make a distinction between the visible and hierarchical Church and the Church as the community of salvation.

The next move came from Rome. First, the *Mission de Paris* was instructed not to recruit further members, and the seminary at Limoges was ordered not to open after the summer vacation. (This was subsequently amended to allow the fifth-year students to finish their course.) Then in September came the letter from Cardinal Pizzardo, Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Seminaries, to all the archbishops and bishops of France forbidding seminarists to work in factories, mines, etc. This concerned chiefly the students of Limoges, and was followed by a request from the Papal Nuncio, Mgr Marella, to bishops and religious superiors to recall their priests who were engaged as priest-workers. In October the whole matter was discussed at the meeting of Cardinals and Archbishops, and a most exceptional course was agreed: that Cardinals Liénart, Gerlier and Feltrin should go to Rome to represent to the Roman authorities and to the Holy Father himself the views of the French bishops regarding the continuance of the apostolate of the priest-workers. On their return they issued a statement, on November 14th, that 'despite the undoubted difficulties and the dangers inherent in this apostolate, the Church definitely does not wish to abandon at any price her efforts for the evangelization of the working masses who are so sadly dechristianized'. But the statement continued that 'ten years of experiment with the priest-workers show that they cannot continue as they are at present. Nevertheless, as the Church is anxious to preserve the contact she has made with the workers' world through the pioneers of this apostolate, she is most willing that priests who have given sufficient proof of their qualities should continue their priestly apostolate in the workers' environment.' Certain conditions, five in all, are then laid down. They concern choice by the bishop and special training, no commitments which would involve responsibility in Trade Unions and the like, the necessity of living either in a presbytery or at least in a community of priests, and that their work, in factory or elsewhere, should merely be part-time.

Most of the facts cited here have been presented to show why

it was inevitable that some action would have to be taken by the ecclesiastical authorities. Hence it appears like the debit side of a balance sheet. To set forth the credit side would require an article twice as long, and then one could add that the good wrought by the priest-workers is incalculable, for it is hidden in the souls of all those they have reclaimed for the Church. Perhaps more important still, where the fruits in the form of conversions have not yet appeared, there is a new attitude to the Church. The average Socialist militant may still shake his head over *les curés*, but now he knows a priest, a priest who maybe has worked beside him on the bench, a priest who knows his cares and his pre-occupations from the inside. He is experiencing Christ, the charity of Christ, in that priest. The determination of the Church to continue the apostolate of the priest-worker is sufficient proof that, on balance, their contribution to the missionary work of the Church in France is necessary. Cardinal Suhard's words in his spiritual diary are still valid and still true: 'The Mission of Paris is a great work, not only for what it can immediately accomplish, but because it provides the principle of a victorious apostolate in areas outside the Church's influence. It must succeed; otherwise there will be a relapse harmful to the present and to the future which it conditions; and this is a particularly grave epoch in the history of the world. Present opportunities will perhaps never come back.'