

## PRIEST-WORKERS IN FRANCE: THE DEBATE CONTINUES

JOHN FITZSIMONS

**T**HE climax of the affair of the worker-priests in France came on January 19, 1954, when the Bishops sent to each of their worker-priests a circular letter communicating to them the decisions of the Hierarchy. The crucial sentences were the following: 'You must, on receipt of this letter, and at the latest before March 1, withdraw from your present firm. . . . We ask you . . . to resign from all temporal responsibilities to which the trust of your comrades may have called you. By the same token, you will be good enough, as from now, not to renew your membership of the trade union you belong to. . . . The sacrifice we ask of you will, in all truth, prove to be a spiritual liberation. It will at the same time be a source of graces for the labouring masses on whose behalf you offer it. We dare not even consider what would happen if you were to refuse to submit.' In the event slightly less than half of the ninety priests so addressed did refuse to submit. At the end of February a meeting was held between the 'submitted' and the 'unsubmitted' and it was agreed to continue with these gatherings for purposes of information. At the first meeting after March 1 it was agreed to publish a book on the work that had been done and a commission was appointed to draw up a plan. When the plan was presented at the following meeting the forty-seven priests who had accepted the Bishops' decision withdrew their support from the project. Nevertheless the others continued and the book was published in November of the same year. A translation of this has now been published in English.<sup>1</sup>

It is not presented as 'a book of history, of doctrine, of polemics, of propaganda or of edification', but as 'a collection of documents which furnish reliable information and checked material'. Unfortunately this is far from the truth. As Albert Beguin pointed out

<sup>1</sup> *The Worker-Priests. A Collective Documentation.* Translated from the French by John Petric. (Routledge & Kegan Paul; 25s.)

in *Esprit*, when the original French version appeared, this work is to be deplored on three grounds. First, on a grave matter of internal discipline, an appeal is made to public opinion. In the Preface the 'unsubmitted' invite the reflective mind to consider their position because 'they are indeed convinced that theirs is the only way, and that their having to undertake it by themselves is itself an injustice'. One whole section of the book, 'What the Ordinary Reader Knew', is devoted to separating the sheep who understood, and this includes a Moslem Communist who writes of the Church wishing to use the priest-workers 'to ensure her own redemption and that of the labouring masses', and the goats, those who agreed with the Bishops' ruling. By implication, of course, this includes those priest-workers who submitted and this constitutes the second regrettable feature of the book. For tactical reasons the unity and community between the two groups has been destroyed. Lastly, the documents have been selected to make a case. Their selection is for propaganda purposes and their manner of presentation is nothing if not polemical. This, as well as the curious anonymous document on 'Class Consciousness' which is replete with quotations from approved Communist authors, gives the lie to the claim made at the end of the book that 'the worker-priests have not invented more or less systematic theories, but an unaccustomed manner of existence'. The truth is, as one can see without even bothering to read between the lines, that the authors of this work have absorbed the ideology of the Communist militants whom they regard as the true leaders of the working class.

Their arguments, explanations and accusations are couched in the jargon of contemporary Marxism and they explicitly refuse to speak in 'the spiritual terms expected of them'. They are critical of Godin and Loew and claim to be following the wishes of the late Cardinal Suhard. (Incidentally it is extraordinary that the translator seems to be completely ignorant of the English editions of their writings and of other modern French writers quoted in these pages.) Yet, despite all this and the belligerent tone used when speaking of the Church, one cannot help sharing the anguish of the men who had to make the cruel choice expressed so well by one of them who wrote to Cardinal Felin: 'In face of condemnation my first reaction, in recourse to the faith and in virtue of a profound attachment to the Church, is to say, "I submit. Painfully. In the dark night. But I submit."' And then I feel that that

would be cowardice. I should be seeking my own personal desire for peace and security at the expense of suppressing the problem. Cowardice towards the working class—and denial of what has been my whole life.’ There is the point. For five, eight, ten years these men had so identified themselves with their mission field, the proletariat, that it conditioned everything, even their religious life. This in turn led them to make claims, exaggerated claims, that if they were suppressed the Church would be demonstrating her unwillingness to accept the proletariat.

The reader may well ask how these men came to be in such a position as to be dominated by this false dilemma. He will not find the answer here except by implication, and must look elsewhere for enlightenment. He will find some indications in a recent book by M. Andreu.<sup>2</sup> His judgments are at times rather harsh but his analysis of the evolution of the attitude of the priest-workers is in general sound. The experiment began with the idea of the conquest of the working masses for Christ but gradually changed into a concept of witness through presence, through complete identification. Moreover there appeared in their ranks the same mistake which had already been condemned forty years earlier in the *Sillon* movement: ‘a strong and sincere love of the masses, the standpoint of social justice, tied up with political positions that were dubious’. This was accentuated by involvement in temporal matters, official positions in trade unions, political agitation and the like. When the priest-workers of Limoges were taken to task by their bishop for participating in a great public manifestation organized by the ‘Partisans of Peace’, they replied that their solidarity with the working class included also its means of action.

The one point which M. Andreu makes clear and which is obscured in *The Worker Priests* is that in the final analysis the decision to suspend the activities of the priest-workers was taken by Rome, by the Pope, not on political grounds but to safeguard the priesthood. The Archbishop of Aix made this quite clear when he wrote: ‘In the experiment as initially conceived the priest was sent to the world of work to establish there the kingdom of God, i.e. to exercise a mission proper to himself. He was authorized to work to the extent that this was necessary or useful to him in fulfilling his priestly mission. Manual work was his naturalization card. But he was not sent to be a worker, he was sent to accomplish

<sup>2</sup> *Grandeurs et Erreurs des Prêtres-Ouvriers*. Par Pierre Andreu. (Amiot-Dumont, Paris.)

a work of spiritual redemption. . . . This idea underwent a gradual change. . . . The Pope and Bishops were afraid that the life of priests, occupied and committed as these were, might little by little be emptied of what is essential in a priestly life. . . . They were apprehensive of harm to the very conception of the priesthood . . . because certain persons represented the life of the priest-worker as being the type of the sacerdotal life. This threatened to cast discredit on the manner in which the priesthood is regularly exercised in an evangelized area, and to minimize the priest's teaching mission and the administration of the sacraments, the Eucharist in particular.'

The defect in M. Andreu's analysis is that he places the blame for these deviations, what the Bishops called the unacceptable evolution, almost entirely on the shoulders of the priest-workers themselves. A few months ago M. Adrien Dansette, the author of two remarkable works on the religious history of contemporary France, in a communication to the Academy of Moral and Political Science in Paris remarked that 'The experiment of the priest-workers lacked thought and direction. . . . Like lost children they were thrown, without sufficient preparation, into a totally new kind of existence. The astonishing thing is not that there were some defections, but that they were so few.' His conclusion was that the experiment should be judged as growing pains of the modern apostolate and that its most fruitful results are in the Church itself, for Catholics have been forced to reflect on matters about which they were hitherto ill-informed and to question many traditionally held positions. 'However one judges the experiment of the priest-workers', said M. Dansette, 'its historical importance must be granted objectively. It has hastened a religious awakening, begun since the last war, from which the Church will emerge changed.'