

## THE EVOLUTION OF A MISSION

RONALD TORBET, O.P.

IT is now little over five years since the worker priest crisis in France provided the world press with a first-class story. For the vast majority in England (whatever may have been the case in France) the disciplinary action of the Holy See and the storm it aroused were, indeed, the first intimation that for several years a number of priests had abandoned the security of presbytery and religious house to work at the dock or in factories and share in every respect the living conditions of the working class. But even for those Catholics in England who were already aware of the movement and sympathetic with its aims, the Roman condemnation came as a bolt from the blue. They found themselves, in fact, singularly ill-equipped to find any answer to the inevitable accusation that the Church had shown itself to be incurably distrustful of any new methods of evangelization and indissolubly wedded to a 'bourgeois' outlook and way of life. Their embarrassment was only sharpened by the outcry which broke out in Catholic circles in France. Was there, in fact, danger of a split in the French Church or of the rise of a new and more bitter Gallicanism? Here at any rate was M. Mauriac talking darkly of a new concordat (not that many of us in England at least made much of what that might mean).

Looking back at all the furore from these five years' distance, what perhaps is most surprising is the silence that has succeeded the storm. What is its meaning? That, after all, the worker priest crisis was only a storm in a teacup, the French blowing off steam in a typically French way? Or is it a sign of a deep and still unhealed wound in the body of French Catholicism? The undiminished *élan* of France in so many other fields of the apostolate might lead us to accept the former explanation. Yet all this must remain somewhat ambiguous with the continuing lack of information as to what has really happened in the field where the worker priests played so important a part, the mission to the de-Christianized proletariat which forms the bulk of the French population.

Fortunately there has just appeared in France a volume which does a great deal to remove the curtain of silence and to reveal what has been happening in this field. This is *Journal d'une Mission Ouvrière, 1941-1959*.<sup>1</sup> The book does not purport to deal with the worker priest movement as a whole. Perhaps more usefully, it is entirely concerned with the fate of one group involved in that movement, the Mission of Marseilles. But it is just this limitation which makes the book more concrete, actual and detailed than would be possible in any general survey of the movement.

As can be seen from the title, the book is not concerned solely with what happened after 1954, but deals with the whole history of this particular mission. It is this which makes it especially useful to us in England. For most of us there was a gap in our knowledge of the worker priest movement from about 1948 onwards. Up to that date, thanks to the enterprise of the publishing house of Sheed and Ward in bringing out translations of the well-known books of the Abbés Godin and Daniel and Pères Perrin and Loew, we had been comparatively well-informed. But these books only put us in touch with the promising beginnings of the movement and of its later developments and internal crises we were ignorant.

The present volume is in fact a sequel to the early book of Père Loew. The form, however, is different. Whereas *Mission to the Poorest* (the title of his first book in the English edition) is a very personal work, the *Journal* is largely composed of letters and reports, whether to superiors or otherwise, which form, in fact, the dossier of a mission team. It is true that most of these documents were written at various times by Père Loew himself, and of course he is responsible for the 'continuity' of the volume; but other members of the team have contributed as well.

It might be useful here to summarize what we already know from the earlier book. It was in 1941 that Père Loew first came into contact with what was to become his chosen field of apostolic activity. He had come to Marseilles to carry out some research into working class conditions as a member of the sociological group, *Economie et Humanisme*. Despairing of being able to do this as an outside observer, he obtained permission from his superiors to work full-time as a docker, thus becoming the first of all the worker priests. At first he used to return to his Dominican priory in the evenings; but after a few months he carried his

<sup>1</sup> Les Editions du Cerf (Rencontres, No. 55), 960 fr.

absorption into the workers' milieu still further by getting leave to live out in a working class *quartier*.

If it was as an observer that Père Loew had entered on this way of life, it was as a missionary that he remained. Quite soon other priests, diocesan and religious alike, joined him, and eventually a parish was entrusted to them as a mission-team. What had been the presbytery of this parish was divided up among three or four needy families, the three or four priests comprising the team occupying a couple of rooms in what had been the parish hall. There they saw to their own household chores, kept an open door for all in the neighbourhood and maintained themselves from the wages of one or more of their number who, without being withdrawn from pastoral activities, worked full-time in a factory or at the docks. The worship of the parish was revived, the administration of the sacraments and other rites disencumbered of the embarrassment of fee and 'class', and gradually a living Christian community built up.

A great deal of the *Journal* is devoted, as was most of *Mission to the Poorest*, to the fundamental problems that faced Père Loew and his companions in their task. What confronted them was a world, the majority of whom, as they soon came to see, had no remaining vestige of belief in the mysteries of the Faith, nor indeed any sense of the sacred at all; who regarded what the Church taught as nothing but mere fable and were firmly convinced that even priests did not really believe but only maintained the fable because it was their 'job' and brought them money and security. How was one to get to grips with this world? Clearly great efforts in the fields of catechesis and liturgy were necessary. But before such efforts could be expected to bear fruit, it was first of all necessary to show that the Church, in its official representatives, the priesthood, was not bound up with money and the 'bosses', that it really transcended the bourgeois way of life and culture with which it was associated in the minds of so many. The only way in which it seemed that this could be done was for the priest to go to the worker, to immerse himself fully in the world of manual labour in order to share its dehumanized conditions of life and work and its fundamental insecurity. Only by becoming real neighbours with this worker world, by *identifying* oneself with it, could the priest hope to win a sympathetic hearing for Christ and his Gospel.

So much we already knew from the earlier volume. Where the *Journal* breaks—for us—new ground is the light it sheds on the development that this notion of identification underwent among members of the mission. For this was the principal problem that was to occupy their minds and dominate their discussions for the next few years. It was the emergence of a particular way of interpreting this identification which led to the public crisis of the winter of '53-54. Not, however, before it had produced an internal crisis within the ranks of the worker priests themselves.

No one who reads the very full documentation of the debates and discussions of this period now given us by Père Loew can fail to be gripped and deeply moved by the story it discloses. The zeal, enthusiasm and sincerity of all in the movement is shown to be above question. The insight into the French workers' mentality and aspirations gained through their experience and here set on record is of the greatest value.

At the same time, viewed dispassionately, as is now possible five years after the storm, the development which the movement took cannot honestly be called anything but wrong-headed, childish even, and unhealthy. Whether this was consciously willed by a majority in the movement or was the work of a few, it is not perhaps possible from the available evidence to judge. What is certain is that this development was such that it could not but hit the public eye and so jeopardize the success and the very existence of the whole experiment.

The development in question consisted in extending the notion of identification beyond the mere sharing of the workers' labour and living conditions to include the adoption of what might briefly be called their 'mythology' and of the whole already existent structure of means which they had evolved for the realization of their practical aims. In a word, it meant sharing the workers' militant *action* as well as his *sufferings*. What in practice this involved was close co-operation with the Communists. The 'baptism of Marxism' became a catchword of the movement. From this climate of thought there arose what was to become an embarrassment and a scandal for so many active lay Catholics of the working class, namely the spectacle of priests taking leading parts in Marxist-inspired trade unions, demonstrations and movements from which they themselves had been taught to hold aloof.

Fortunately there were others in the movement who opposed this trend, and Père Loew and his earliest companions were prominent among them. From the documents now made available we can follow step by step his growing uneasiness at the way things were going and the many efforts he made, with a striking humility, to communicate this uneasiness to the younger members of his team who all leaned towards the opposite view and were by now in the majority. To help clear up his own difficulties we see him making a journey to Rome. There he presents a statement of the principles upon which his mission was based to Mgr Montini from whom, as indeed from so many, he receives a most sympathetic hearing. But at the same time he becomes aware of a certain hardening against this new form of apostolate.

What in fact was troubling Rome was the same as what was causing Père Loew disquiet. It was the incompatibility of the turn things had taken with the ideals—or rather the *raison d'être*—of the priesthood. The fundamental difficulty was not that participation in the militant worker movement was a danger to the priest's own spiritual life. It was, of course, that, and that was serious enough. But what was much more serious was that this activity prevented the priest from carrying out his *function* as a priest. It hampered him, in fact, in his essential activity of bearing witness to Christ and of bringing Christ and his Gospel to other men.

It is important to stress this point. Nothing is easier—and it was a thing frequently done five years ago—than to label Rome's preoccupation in the worker priest crisis as a sort of old- and nursery-maidish anxiety lest the traditional sacristy-pieties of the priestly caste be abandoned and the souls of individual priests stained through contact with a rough and alien world. It is foolish and false to think Rome ever will, or ever should, be indifferent to the personal piety of the Catholic priest. But it is to have lost her mind, and the mind of Christ, to forget the paradox that while the individual holiness of every man is the Church's ultimate concern, for her the personal sanctification of the priest is subordinate to just that concern, and is in fact attained only to the degree that the priest makes this his own, and *sole*, concern. *Pro eis sanctifico meipsum*. To give all one's energies to seeking the temporal welfare of a class, or even of mankind as a whole, is not his task. To think one can do this as a means to the advance of the

Gospel is both naively childish and contrary to the clearest teaching of revelation.

Nothing indeed is more interesting in the *Journal* than the way in which it shows Père Loew, the pioneer worker priest, as having reached the position which was to guide the action of the Holy See long in advance of the blow itself, and even perhaps as having anticipated the French episcopate in his awareness of the dangers of the situation. This at any rate one would seem to gather from his respectful critique, now published, of a draft *directoire* for worker priests drawn up by the Assembly of Cardinals and Bishops of France and sent to him for his comments. The blow which the Roman authorities ultimately delivered was a severe one. It could not help but be severe. What one cannot say is that it was 'unsignalled'.

The documents which deal with the time of the Roman intervention are, as one might expect, some of the most moving in this dossier. This is particularly true of the brief two pages in which Père Loew describes how he set about what must have been the extremely harrowing task of explaining to his fellow-dockers what it was all about. The following extract fully vindicates his own personal position and needs no comment:

'Here word for word is the explanation I give them:

"It's like this. Some of our number seeing there's so much social injustice around and that the bosses can't or won't do anything about it, have felt that they themselves had to take a hand as leaders in the unions and secretaries in the movements . . ."

And I am ready to declare under oath that no sooner did I ever use this simple phrase than the man I was speaking to would interrupt and say:

—"Ah, there you are. They've been taking up politics. No, no; priests oughtn't to take up politics."

This piece of mine has been repeated dozens of times and always, without the least prompting on my part, the same conclusion has been given in reply. This seems to me to prove quite conclusively that the workers have no difficulty whatsoever in understanding that it is not for the priest to meddle in these matters.

Some of the workers have quite spontaneously offered the opinion:

“Ah yes, it’s all right for priests, if they’re workers, to belong to the union that looks after them. But they certainly oughtn’t to go further than that.”

Nevertheless, they invariably followed this opinion with the comment:

‘All the same, though, if they’re suppressed that’ll only show that the Vatican’s on the side of the rich’.

Fortunately, however, although the Marseilles team was badly hit by the blow—the limitation of hours of work was, of course, the greatest difficulty—the Mission survived. Very soon we see the team doing second-best to working in the docks and factories—this being now, in practice, impossible (what employer would engage a man for three hours a day?)—by taking up piece-work at home. If the witness in the workshop was lost, the witness in the working class *quartier* went on. And the live Christian community built up out of the parish they had taken over rallied to the support and defence of their priests.

It was, in fact, their being integrated into the parish structure which saved the Marseilles Mission at the time of the crisis, just perhaps as earlier it had saved them from the worst excesses of the movement elsewhere. Père Loew indeed had always been acutely aware of the danger involved in separating the worker priest mission from the existing parish. The two must, somehow, co-operate. Otherwise a ‘two-church’ mentality could too easily and all too disastrously grow, the myth of a ‘live’ mission community growing round the worker priests set over against the ‘dead’ parish administered by the ‘official’ *curé* from the bourgeois seclusion and comfort of his presbytery.

The last pages of the *Journal* deal with more recent and perhaps more profound developments. Oddly enough, what one might readily have expected to be somewhat melancholy reading, is on the contrary suffused with a sober hope. The drastic surgical treatment carried out by authority had removed the canker which had been poisoning the movement. This removal allowed Père Loew and his companions the more easily and calmly to think out ways and means of remedying certain defects in the movement which he had gradually come to see as the causes of the disaster that had come upon it. Chief among these defects were: the lack of any real and definite channel of authority and mutual information effectively functioning between the priests on the mission

and the episcopate; the tendency for young and inexperienced priests to be thrown into the mission with a quite inadequate background of training, whether intellectual, spiritual or practical; and, largely as a consequence of this last, the whole febrile, shrilly impatient and exasperated atmosphere of the years preceding the crisis, with all its facile slogans 'baptiser le marxisme', 'la théologie est à refaire' (not, as Père Loew remarks, that those who said this had any fund of ideas with which to begin this refashioning), and the rest. The team remembered something Père Congar had said to them away back in 1948:

'Plus on est aux frontières, plus il faut renouer contact avec le centre, plus on entre dans l'extraordinaire, plus il faut s'appuyer sur une spiritualité classique.'

In the end it came to be seen that there actually existed in the Church today a new and flexible instrument whereby the traditional Catholic values of authority and obedience and of an intense and enduring intellectual and spiritual formation could be combined with new adventures in the field of the apostolate. Thus was born the secular institute, Mission Ouvrière Saints Pierre-et-Paul, with its ideal of the traditional *vita apostolica* of contemplation and action—*contemplata aliis tradere*—to be lived in a new setting.

Having traced the fortunes of the worker mission in Marseilles from the day Père Loew first donned his overalls and signed on at the docks until the present, we are perhaps in a better position to answer the questions we asked ourselves at the beginning of this article. What, then, is to be our judgment on the outcry of '53-54 and the silence that followed? To characterize the former as a typical display of French emotional pyrotechnics sparked off by an innate love of exaggeration would be a profound and all too smug a mistake. There might be much about the particular form the worker priest movement first took that made it unfit for export—at least across the Channel. Yet its relevance as a first try-out of something significant and of immense value is surely not confined to France. For one thing, it is not perhaps irrelevant to remind ourselves that a vast sector of the world's population is now under Communist control, and that therefore, whatever one thinks of the slogan, 'baptism of Marxism', at least a Church with a world mission can but have the baptism of Marxists very high in her list of priorities. Then again there are so many examples in



history, and perhaps even more in the present, of France being the first to express in a concrete form what was later found to be the common aspiration for a new growth in the Church as a whole. One can cite as examples of this the modern liturgical, biblical and Marian movements. It would, then, be unwise to allow our disapproval of certain initial excesses to prevent us from giving fair and serious consideration to the suggestion that the birth of the ideal of a priestly mission to the working class involving a (legitimate) measure of identification with that class might not equally be a sign of the Holy Ghost at work in the Church today. *Nova et vetera*. For all its appearance of being something quite unprecedented, the movement has in fact for a Christian the most compelling antecedents: Peter at Joppa lodging with Simon the tanner; Paul, who sought to make himself all things to all men, so sensitive lest he be a burden to the new Christian communities he had founded, plying the loom along with Aquila and Priscilla, refugees from Rome, in the port of Corinth; the Lord himself and his long years at the carpenter's bench at Nazareth. What we heard in '53-54 expressed the pain of those who thought they were witnessing the suppression of something they rightly judged to be authentically of the Gospel.

We should be correct, then, in concluding that after all a severe wound had been inflicted on all that was best in the whole body of French Catholicism. The mistake would be to think the wound was mortal. The evidence now presented by Père Loew of the evolution of his Mission Ouvrière in the silence of the last five years towards its present healthier and sturdier form surely makes it clear to the eyes of faith that the Holy See in the moment of crisis acted not as an executioner but as a tool in the hands of the divine Husbandman who has plainly told us (John, xv, 2) that he trims fruit-bearing branches—in order that they may bring forth more fruit. Perhaps we should leave the last word to Père Loew himself:

‘There is no movement in the Church which escapes this law. For it is God's express will. Newman and Lagrange, to mention only the most recent examples, fully understood its profound meaning. Some of my readers may feel a little puzzled and point to the multitude of somewhat trivial and ineffectual activities and movements in the Church that go on growing and are never interfered with. Why are these left in peace? Can

the answer be that the Husbandman foresees that all the fruit they ever could bear anyway comes to such a tiny amount?

But all who are engaged in a worth-while work that is to endure must expect and accept the law of the pruning-hook. And it is up to them to maintain a firm resolve to *abide* within the Church of Christ, no matter what the cost may be. In this way they will be pruned, but not cut off. They will continue to live and will bear their fruit in due season.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> One of the chapters in the *Journal* is called 'Catéchisme des adultes', and here Père Loew discusses the problem of how one introduces to the truths of Christianity a world which has lost all sense of God, which never uses the word 'soul' and which the language of the Bibles provokes only to laughter. That Père Loew has over the years become a past-master in this difficult art is borne witness to by a remarkable group of eight 'albums' appearing in the series *Fêtes et Saisons*, and employing to the full all its skill in presentation and the use of illustration. These are: *Dieu Existe, Le Mal, Quel est cet homme, Jésus-Christ?, Jésus-Christ te parle, Homme, qui es-tu?, L'Eglise familière et mystérieuse, Le Miracle, signe de Dieu*, and *Mais enfin, mon Dieu, qui êtes-vous?* (Editions du Cerf, various prices, 50-60 fr. each). For an excellent introduction in English to the directness, freshness and charm of Père Loew's approach see *The Love we Forget* (Geoffrey Chapman, Doctrine and Life Series, 2s. 6d.), containing five T.V. addresses.