

French Worker Priests and the Little Brothers of de Foucauld

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Summary: Discusses the differences and similarities of the Worker Priests and the Little Brothers. Explains the Church's condemnation of some worker-priests who advocated a close association between Marxism and Catholicism, but is distraught at the Church's inconsistency in not condemning those priests who are closely linked to capitalism. Sees the present day scandal of the Church as an imbalance between spiritual and material works. (DDLW #174).

The Worker priests of France, for the last ten years, have left the side of the “faithful” and have gone after the lost sheep of France. They have been doing what Jesus Christ Himself told them to do in their great love of God and of their brothers. This work which has caught the attention of the world began with the Resistance movement in France when both Communist and Catholic lived side by side in prison and concentration camp where they began to know one another and love one another. It began with the great vision of a great churchman, Cardinal Suhard, (whose collected writings can be obtained from the Fides Press in Chicago).

With a Strong Cry

And now, after ten years trial, these worker priests have been under the scrutiny and criticism of the world so that every day there is some mention of their work and present struggles in the secular press as well as the Catholic. The criticism comes from the rich and powerful, whose greed and wealth make them sensitive to the criticism of these new articulate “poor,” as well as from their lawful superiors, the present Cardinals of France and the Holy See in Rome. Also these priests have answered back, have cried out “with a strong cry and tears,” so that the world has heard and is wondering if this is going to be another case of the crucifixion of the good, the failure of the Cross, or of disobedience in the Church, another Action Francaise.

Conditions

On February 27 the Cardinal of Paris refused the appeals of two thirds of the workers priests, and insisted that the mission among the worker be limited by the rules laid down by Rome. Instead of working eight hours a day, they were permitted only to work four; instead of living alone, they were to live with their fellows; they were not to commit themselves to political action, or to membership in trade unions.

Little Brothers

There has been no mention in all this controversy of the status of the Little Brothers of Jesus, (an outgrowth of the work of Father Charles de Foucauld who was killed by the Arabs in the desert in 1914 and who had no postulant or novice for his proposed order during all his life). The Little Brothers now number 180 (two thirds will be priests) and are scattered all over the world, and are still permitted to work a full eight-hour day in the mines, on the docks, in the jungles. However, they live in communities of two or three, and have the Blessed Sacrament in their huts and shanty towns and slum dwellings, wherever they are. There are also 200 Little Sisters who earn their living in the same way.

Father General

During the last month we were very fortunate in having the Father General of the order, who with two others founded this great new apostolate in 1933, who spoke to us for four hours about their work and showed us slides of the way they lived all over the world.

Since the controversy over the worker priests' mission in Paris and throughout France has started, the Little Brothers of Jesus have received word from Rome that they can continue to work eight hours a day and live as they are doing. There are even two of their number living and working on a collective farm in Palestine! Their mission is in the entire world, not just in France, and there has never been a suggestion of political activity in their work.

Living in Community

As to living in community, two years ago an encyclical **Mens Nostrae** was published by the Holy See, and encyclical coming directly from the Holy Father, showing the mind of the Church as to how priests should live and work together. There has been little attention paid to this encyclical.

The unfortunate aspect of the controversy over the priest workers is that it is being used by the enemies of the Church to belabor the Church.

Blackfriars

The best resume of the situation is made by Father John Fitzsimmons in the February issue of Blackfriars, still our favorite Dominican publication despite a little acrimonious dispute a few months ago. This scholarly article sums up the exact reasons why the issue of the priest workmen has to be taken up.

Cardinal Saliege has said there was a yielding on the part of the priest to “the temptation to believe that his essential function is to take the place of the lay leader in the workers’ fight.” (In the U.S. priests are in many cases doing the work laymen could do such as teaching).

The article goes on to state:

“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 by the priest workers and their followers. This group led by Fr. Montuclard has been the spearhead of this attempt, and the last two years has seen a progressive condemnation of the Church of their views. Their argument can be reduced to three heads: (1) the only philosophy which is immanent in the workers’ movement is Marxism; (2) a distinction must be made between Marxist morality and its atheism—the former can be accepted, even the latter can contribute to human progress; (3) 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 . . . which contained many true insights but upheld this two phase idea of social reform.” This movement was condemned by the Assembly of Cardinals and Archbishops in October, 1953. “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 such arguments as these.

It will be seen that the issue is not too clear as to whether or not any of the priest workers actually did embrace Marxism as a solution, though they went along with them in the union and political action and their work for peace.

Agreement

While we do not agree with their emphasis on political action and peace action (they are no more pacifists than the Communists are) we still do not see why there should be such a furor in the Church while the great mass of priests of the Church go along wholeheartedly with Capitalism, which Count de La Torre in **Osservatore Romano** called a cancer on the social body of the Church, and worse than Communism.

We hear of plenty of electioneering and political action amongst priests when it comes to legislation about Bingo or getting our share of State benefits for our

schools, and tax exemption. But where are the priests crying out for the workers in time of strike, crying out for the poor, living among them in their tenements?

Waste

Last month one of our workers washed dishes in a monastery for some days and witnessed the thick steaks, chops, roasts which were served twice a day to the fifteen or so members of the community. What was left (on the platters as well as on the plates) was thrown into the garbage, and the men at the door, the ambassadors of Christ, were turned away harshly, first by the housekeeper, and then by the priest at the front door, who then came out to the kitchen reproaching her for not having gotten rid of the bums for good and all in the first place. Are the poor the first children of the church? Or the rich? Are the workers more like Jesus of Nazareth, or are the industrialists, the absentee landlords? Christ came for the sinners, He told us, so that must go for Bowery sinners too.

Clarification

As far as we of **The Catholic Worker** are concerned, this controversy is all to the good in that it will perhaps through much discussion and suffering bring about clarification of thought on the subject of manual labor and voluntary poverty as essential means in bringing forth good fruit. There are many aspects of the age-old Mary-Martha dispute in this turmoil. The Holy See is wishing to stress the primacy of the spiritual – the necessity of emphasis being placed on the Sacraments, as means of grace, rather than on the human work and suffering of these noble priests. The great scandal of the age is that those without the sacraments are so often superior in charity, courage, even laying down their lives for their brothers, to the “practicing Catholic” who partakes of the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist and then stands by while his brother is exploited, starved, beaten, and goes on living his bourgeois life, his whole work being to maintain “his standard of living,” and neglecting the one thing needful, love of God and brother. In the union field, even in this country, it has been the union organizer, often the Communist, who has risked jail and beatings to organize textile workers and migrant workers while the Catholic too often stands by and accepts the benefits of the union and does not earn them.

Both Mauriac and Maritain have said that he who loves his brother and works for justice is working for Christ even though he deny Him; that is, deny Him as he sees Him in the nominal Christian. Perhaps they accept Him on the Cross where He took our sins upon Himself. What a grace to recognize Him so!

With the infinite variety of work in the Church, to some one of which each one of us has his vocation though we may turn away and refuse it, there is of course

a great contrast between the work of the Little Brothers of Jesus and that of the priest workers.

Bless Them All

Both are doing tremendous work. We who have worked for the same length of time as the Little Brothers, since 1933, can see that no Point Four program, no technological advances, no purely material means are going to remedy the disease of today. On the other hand, seeing too as we do the slums of Harlem, the East Side, the perversion of the masses by poverty and propaganda, we also realize that we have to make the kind of social order where it is easier for men to be good. Even two or three Little Sisters and the Little Brothers living in shanty towns can scarcely realize the despair of the mother and father of eight or nine children, living in two rooms, in danger of dispossession even there, surrounded by the filth of halls and areaways and alleys, rats and vermin, seeping plumbing, stench and dampness, cold and disease of mind and body. The depth of the suffering of the world is measureless, a bottomless abyss and our only approach to it is through the dark night of the soul, a taste of which the priest workmen of France are now having. God bless them all.