

A TRUE VOCATION

Role of the Worker-Priest in an Industrial Society

THERE are many forms of religious vocation open to priests and laymen in the Church of God. They are not all parochial, and the ministry of the industrial-worker-priest claims at least as sympathetic a hearing.

It is a mistake to judge all such vocations by the yard-stick of some understaffed parish. The parochial system can easily swallow the lot and still be hungry, having devoured many of its own vital roots and shoots put forth to explore.

The handful of worker-priests in this country claim that theirs is a religious vocation in the true sense. Whatever the future brings forth for it, they feel bound to obey the spirit that is in them. So do their wives and other lay associates, for all are one in this, and all alike have a voice in their conferences.

United Cross-Section

To speak of a "Worker-Priest Movement" is therefore quite inadequate, however convenient or inevitable the term might be. Rather is it conceived as a cross-section of the Church united in a common cause. Between its clergy and laity there is no sense at all of any difference in status—only in function. This last is a thing which many congregations have yet to learn, and, if it seems odd in towns, how much more so in villages, where the feudal remnants are long dying and are kept in artificial life by interested parties.

The worker-priests pursue their ministry in different ways and under diverse conditions, though only one or two earn as much as a normal incumbent. They all feel that the Church is largely estranged from the lives of most manual workers in factory, field and mine. While acknowledging the value of missions to industry from more conventional platforms, they recognise for themselves a call to active involvement in the common life of these people. They desire to be at one with them, in the actual conditions of life and work, as well as in heart and mind (for many are truly and honourably at one with them in heart and mind).

They are of several varieties of Churchmanship, but all are markedly sacramental in outlook and in varying degrees of practice. One says, "You cannot expect workers to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness if you do not demonstrate it sacramentally in their presence. The sacramental life of the Church must be lived in the midst of the working-class life if we are to show the relevance of eternity to life in time."

Religion and Politics

This man, who is a priest, is married, with a family, and lives a life in community with another family. The adult members belong to the Society of the Catholic Commonwealth, which is devoted to the task of declaring that Christianity is essentially sacramental, social, and therefore intrinsically revolutionary in character. They have

affinity with the "New Left," and are active in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (one spent a fortnight in prison). Like others of their brethren, they think that religion has a lot to do with politics, that the worker knows it in his heart, and that the Church had better wake up to it.

It would be a mistake to assume, however, that all are drawn to Leftish

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Party-politics, or that this is the hallmark of the worker-priest and his associates, whether clerical or lay. Some flatly refuse to wear any party label at all, on the ground that they wish to be known first and foremost as *Christians*, without denying in any way that the faith must be applied—and that involves politics.

Their whole purpose, so it seems to these, could be made of no spiritual account if people began saying (as some do), "I suppose you do this work because you are a Socialist." Less likely would be, "I suppose you do it because you are a Tory." That ought to give Conservatives food for thought, but no one will be surprised if one or two vote for that party. Our inspiration is Christian, and on this at least all are agreed.

Pious Nonsense

The theological and practical implications of priesthood are an ever-recurring subject for debate at conferences. But, like their French counterparts, the worker-priests in this country entirely reject the notion, promulgated by the Vatican, that their manner of life is out of keeping with the priestly vocation. They hold it pious nonsense to affirm that the priestly soul is more in peril in factories than in Paris salons or in some church congregations.

If such was the case, what a feeble thing the priestly soul must be, and how hopelessly distant from reality the training of it! Is it not fitting for a priest to share the toils, hopes and fears (which still are real) of the humblest of his flock? If it is fitting to do so in spirit, how much more in practice, which alone can prove the spirit—both to one's own self, and to others.

Revealing Comment

The writer once asked a miner, "What would you think if one of our own men here became a priest?"

"I wouldn't think much of it."

"Why not?"

"He'd be changing a hard job for an easy one."

"Suppose he went on earning his living here?"

"That would be different."

Not all miners, indeed, were happy about their parish priests working in the pit. Their reasons were various: "Religion has nothing to do with this"; "Keep to your own class"; "What must your father think after all that money spent on your education. I'd disown my son if he did that!"; "I can't look up to a man who works down here!"

Other comments were revealing: "You must be at rather a loose end

when you get home." This reaction is a common one.

Others consider that "the ordinary parson is just paid to tell the tale. Do you expect us to swallow what *he* says?" If only for that reason, it seems that some of the clergy at least should preach the gospel "free of charge," administer the sacraments, and perform such other duties as they can, unencumbered by grants, fees and augmentations. Still, this makes them as parish clergy rather difficult to live with!

However, the worker-priest can give much relief to hard-pressed parish priests, and play some part in parochial life (if the vicar is understanding, as well as long-suffering). The long vista of sermons and services without aid and without end comes to oppress the spirit of many a parish priest, and even a monthly release would refresh him.

Officially on Staff

Some give much more than this, according to what hopes they can entertain of the parish church as a possible home for their contacts. Some are frankly pragmatic, and try to discover from day to day where the best solution lies. All alike, however, are official members of parish church staffs, and greatly value this connection.

One has charge of a parish, after four years sharing the charge of a Kent mining-parish. The two cases are different. In the mining parish were two priests working on different shifts—one early and one late. Also, the bulk of families looked to the same pit for a livelihood.

In the second case there is only one priest, with most of his people looking for a living to factories seven miles distant. Yet they travelled by the same trains, and he, travelling likewise, is with all those people for an hour each day (Monday to Friday). Few of the clergy meet so many of their people so regularly.

To describe how it works in practice needs a good deal more than this article, for the matter has many aspects. Not least is why he thinks it desirable even to attempt such a task, which is to present a picture of the life of a worker-priest in the round, integrated at all points with the parochial and pastoral life, claiming no other privilege than that already available to men with "civic duties" to perform.

Criticism of the worker-priest certainly comes to a head in his case, even though the parish that he deals with is necessarily small (about 850). He labours under enormous initial disadvantages. If it was not so, his efforts might look rather different. All his personal failings, his lack of success in any direction, anything different he does (like insisting on adequate thought before baptisms and weddings) are put down to his way of life. (A "normal" priest, it is fondly hoped, would have none of these faults.)

Crypto-Communist?

He is classed, by those who fancy themselves, as a crypto-Communist, and as somehow letting them down. His very existence is an affront to snobbery and class-consciousness. He needs to say nothing in those respects. (In a village these things still count for a lot and, alas, in few places more than

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the parish church.)

He brings to light a whole crop of parish diseases, which have long festered in decent obscurity. If he retains his place there very long, it would be a miracle, for he has forgone the privilege of security, by which an incumbent is hedged around.

Even genuine progress, in spite of some objectors who have left because of him, may avail him little—least of all those things actually capable of proof, like more Communion, bigger collections, etc. Quite right; the thing that matters is a growth of genuine Christian living, and that is not so open to proof.

A recent article in this paper suggested that the man who saw the fruits of his labour was fortunate. Happy, too, is he who has no group in his parish wishing him anywhere but where he is. Whether it is actually possible to preach the gospel without giving offence (in addition to the normal offences of one's own wicked nature) is another matter entirely.