

The priests in overalls exchange notes

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BBRITAIN'S five Church of England "worker-priests" spent the weekend talking over their movement in the 14-room vicarage of Harlington, the Bedfordshire village which jailed Bunyan in 1660.

Today they will exchange their dog-collars for overalls and be back at their factory benches.

Their host was the Rev. John Strong, 43-year-old vicar of Harlington, who does a 44-hour week checking oil meters at a Luton engineering works.

This earns him £10 a week, but his main purpose is to meet factory workers who come to him during tea breaks for religious guidance.

No preaching

He never preaches to them. He keeps his sermons for the pulpit and fits his parish duties into evenings and weekends.

With him during the weekend was the Rev. Martyn Grubb, son of Sir Kenneth Grubb, a company director and one of the leading laymen in the Church Assembly.

The others were the Rev. John Rowe (Stepney), the Rev. John Wilcox (Warrington) and the Rev. Tom Quigley (Carlisle).

Four of their wives accompanied them; also two interested laymen.

Bishops approve

"We met simply to share experiences and discuss common problems," Mr. Strong said yesterday.

"We have no formal organisation, but we hope that other priests and laymen will adopt this vocation."

"We have taken up this way of life with the approval of our bishops. Our concern as a group is to do something personally to bring the Church into touch with those who work in industry."

Worker-Priests

Old-fashioned eyebrows would certainly have been raised at the picture of the activities of a group of clergy, given in our report, this week, of a recent conference of English worker-priests and their colleagues. At first sight there is indeed something odd about clergymen who earn their living by being whole-time engineering craftsmen, shop stewards, fitters, factory workers and electricians' mates. Such priests are making a courageous and often lonely effort to bridge the yawning gap between the Church and the masses of working men in this country. Two points, however, seem clearly to emerge from the experience gained over several years in the venture with worker-priests in the Roman Church in France. One is that it is absolutely essential that the work of such priests should be closely linked to the normal life of the Church in the parishes, both for the sake of the priests themselves and for the sake of those whom they strive to win. And such priests must beware of aligning themselves too exclusively with the political organizations which they encounter in their unusual field of operations. It would for instance be regrettable, in this country, if it was assumed that any worker-priest must be an active worker for the Labour Party; there are, after all, millions of working men not of that political persuasion. In any case, a worker-priest might be just as important in a manager's office, or on a board of directors, as at the factory bench.