

# TRAGEDY OF THE WORKER-PRIESTS

by Roger Lloyd

The industrial situation which the French worker-priests were designed to meet has been described over and over again. They started in 1944, but it still remains much what it was. The experiment is now to be ended: and because neither the Papacy nor any other religious authority can rest content with this unredeemed situation, something else will have to be found to replace the worker-priests' mission. It will not be easy to find it.

Just as well known is the basic belief which caused these young priests to act as they did. It was that only an act of complete self-identification with industrial workers and their families could bridge the intolerable gulf between them and the Church. Perhaps it was because they were Frenchmen (and therefore thoroughgoing in their acceptance of logic as their guiding star) that, while their imitators in some other countries modified this act of identification in various ways, they themselves carried it through without any compromise whatever. So it all began with the blessings of authority, the prayers of the faithful, the admiration of the rest of the world for what was certainly high heroism, and the high hopes of the whole of Christendom.

Some day the full history ought to be written. When it is, one of the

first things which will strike the historian is the frightening ease and swiftness with which these young priests were absorbed into the militant sections of the French working-class movement and stamped with its marks. There is no doubt of this. In a symposium of their own testimonies, written by themselves in 1954, when the Roman Hierarchy first recalled most of them, they made it plain that many of them had become the enthusiasts of the class war, and that most of them had refused to obey their orders of recall. That book was published in England by Kegan Paul—"The Worker Priests: A Collective Documentation"—and for this imaginary historian it will be a document of deep importance. What it shows, in a single phrase, is that far from converting the working class, the working class, with terrifying ease and speed, converted them.

The historian will then wonder why this happened. Perhaps he will find his reason in what now looks like an initial miscalculation of decisive importance. The worker-priests were sure they must totally identify themselves with the people of the factory world. They must dress like them,

live like them, eat with them, work with them. The only thing they were to carry over from their past and into their new world was their Christianity.

But there is, alas, another word for identification carried so far. It is amputation. It is possible for a man to separate himself absolutely from his past, from everything which has made him what he is. It is possible, for these young men did it. But, except when a man's past is wholly evil, can it ever be right? And if some would judge it to be right, can it ever be sensible?

The purpose of this identification was more than a demonstration that the Church truly cared for the people in the gloomier streets of Paris. It was made because it was then supposed that no one who did not live to the full the life of an industrial worker could know how his mind worked. That is a very dubious assumption. A long experience and a sympathetic imagination can carry a man far into the recesses of another man's mind. The minds of his people are not hidden from the good parish priest because he does not live exactly as they do. Now all's to be done again. A religious order of a quite new kind sounds the likeliest answer. But that is another and a very difficult question.

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