

The cloth cap priesthood

BY GEOFFREY MOORHOUSE

ON Monday a 20,000-word tract is to be published in justification of the English worker-priests. "Priests and Workers: a rejoinder," by John Rowe (Darton Longman and Todd, 6s 6d) tackles one of the central problems facing the Church today: its relationship—or, rather, its lack of one—with the industrialised mass of our society.

This is not a peculiarly Anglican confrontation. Every part of the Church in this country has experienced it in greater or lesser degree. But the Anglican Church, preoccupied with its Establishment status, was slow to recognise that the gap even existed. Not until the Sheffield Industrial Mission was launched just after the war was any organised attempt made to come to grips with the problem. And in so far as the Church today has any policy at all to cover this gap it lies in this deployment of diocesan missionaries to industry.

It does not, at any rate, yet take into account the potential value of the worker-priests. Even those few Church leaders who are aware of the problem and the issues it involves seem, for the most part, to be inhibited from backing the worker-priest idea by what happened in France between 1943 and 1959. In 1943 the Assembly of Cardinals and Archbishops sent Catholic priests incognito to minister to deported workers in the German labour camps; in 1959 the Vatican finally banned the worker-priest movement. In those 16 years the French worker-priests (and at the height of the movement there were about a hundred of them) had not just abandoned the status of priest for that of worker, which was disconcerting enough to the authorities in the Holy Office; much worse, they had so identified themselves with the workers as to take part in industrial action alongside the Communists.

THERE is nothing resembling a movement in England. In 1951 two priests, Jack Strong and Michael Gedge, got themselves jobs down a pit on the Kent coalfield. That was the beginning of the vocation in this country. Gedge has since joined the Roman Catholic Church; but Strong, at 49, a labourer in an Oxford motor works, is the senior member of the Worker Church Group, which now numbers six priests and their families. It is on behalf of the group that John Rowe, one of them, has written his book. If the idea ever should develop into something on the French scale the WCG would form the nucleus. But in addition to the group there are nine worker-priests who have recently emerged from the Southwark Ordination Course; and in the Newcastle diocese a handful of men are under training.

The WCG is not in any but the most informal sense an organisation. Its members meet once a year to exchange notes, but apart from that don't have much contact with each other. Organisation, in a way, is the thing they have renounced. They are, by all appearances, primarily earning their bread and butter like every other factory worker: as labourers, as a fork-lift truck driver, as a radial

driller, as an electrician's mate, as a radio assembler. They are indistinguishable from the men who work alongside them and their lives outside the factory are not markedly dissimilar; they live in council houses, in decaying terraces, on anonymous speculative estates. One of them is a shop steward. Another is a Labour Party member of his city council.

Only in what their workmates would regard as spare time do they adopt any conventions of the Anglican priesthood. Generally they assist in some way the staff of whatever parish they live in. For Tony Williamson, the Oxford city councillor and the fork-lift truck driver, this means celebrating communion every Sunday and once during the week, and preaching every other Sunday. For Jack Strong it means sharing the Sunday services with the priest in charge of his estate church, running confirmation classes, doing a bit of visiting.

WHAT they emphatically do not do is to behave like a conventional priest when they are on the shop floor. They do not go out of their way to pass the Christian message overtly at the work bench, or hold prayer meetings, or anything like that. When the question is put to them they tend to laugh at it because it implies that the questioner doesn't come within a mile of seeing what it is they are about and doesn't have a clue about the climate of the average English factory.

What they are about is best suggested in the reasons two of them give for having become worker-priests. John Rowe: "One's impulse was to go where people are exploited. . . ." Jack Strong: "After the war I began to feel the tension between the ideal of Christian priesthood and the social status expected of him. . . . One's got to soak oneself in their way of life without looking at them as pew fodder, in the hope that something eventually may come out of it."

It is a Micawberish contract that they have made for themselves. They do not give the impression that they are hot for conversions, and when asked what impact they think they have made they tend to shrug and point, it might be thought, to very small gains: apologies for bad language when they're within earshot, some sign after a while that their mates believe them to be honest and trustworthy rather than slick religious propagandists. What counts most of all is *la presence*, as the French worker-priests insisted. Just being there. Being there to show that the Church is prepared to dirty its hands and be on the dole as well as to starch its linen and cash its cheques. Being there also to demonstrate to the Church itself that class division still exists. Which is possibly another reason why the Church has been cool so far to the worker-priests.

Surprisingly, the most notable critic of the worker-priest idea is the Church's leading crusader for greater engagement with the industrial society, E. R. Wickham, the Bishop of Middleton. Wickham was himself a working-class boy from East London who did time at the factory bench before studying for the priesthood (he is still liable to unsettle

pillars of the parish because he does not look, or pronounce his vowels, or preach, like the Mothers' Union notion of a bishop). It was he who led the Sheffield Industrial Mission from its foundation in 1944. And it was he who four years ago in "Priests and Workers; an Anglo-French discussion" (to which Rowe's book is the rejoinder) poured cold water on the prospect of a movement similar to that of the French over here.

Ted Wickham bases his argument on a denial of class division in Britain similar to that which made the French venture important. What he wants to see is an increase in lay activity in industry and throughout the Church's life. He regards the prospect of a great infiltration of worker-priests as a deflection of the Church from this purpose. He throws his weight behind the industrial chaplaincies which are now dotted throughout the country.

There are about 35 Anglican industrial chaplains, working from cathedral bases around the predominantly urban dioceses. Simon Phipps, the senior of Coventry's three full-time chaplains (one of them a Congregational minister), reckons to spend at least as much time organising and writing in his cathedral office as he does in the three factories he looks after. There he plans, arranges, and later analyses the discussion groups and other offshoots of his contact with the factory workers; the whole point of the exercise is to learn what goes on in industry, to stimulate the discussion between theology and industry, to inform the Church (in a way) of what it's like on the shop floor.

THIS means that his contact with the workers in their own environment is limited to his twice or thrice-weekly excursions round the benches. It means that it takes a year to get to know in any sense the men in one shop of, say, Standard Motors. It is not a lofty-respectful relationship ("Heavens, no, they don't treat me like the visiting vicar, they all call me Simon") but it cannot be a very close one except with the few who are comparatively receptive to his calls. "You start by saying 'How are you?' or something equally asinine; it's a matter of trying to get into contact with them as a parson and as a human being. You may get a chance to say why you're doing this; one hopes that one begins to give a slightly different image of the parson and the Church from the one they've generally got." Up to a point he obviously succeeds because twice when there's been the threat of redundancies around Coventry the shop stewards have asked him to lobby at Westminster with them and he's gone. But this is a point rather short of the one the worker-priests are trying to make.

Tony Williamson puts it this way: "I wouldn't say that an industrial chaplain can't understand what being redundant means; but *being* redundant is different." He had three months of it himself, driving a laundry van until he got back to the motor works. "A lot of my mates, you could tell, thought they'd probably seen the last of me then. They thought redundancy would make me pack it in and become a proper parson." Whatever the

Church makes of it, that was one of the worker-priests' battle honours. It is one that an industrial chaplain could not possibly have won, living on a stipend with his future secure. However much he may sympathise with them, he can never identify himself with the factory hands because he can only make contact with them at all by kind permission of the management. If he supported them in a strike he would have biased his position at once. Phipps, for one, acknowledges this weakness in the industrial chaplain's position. Even Ted Wickham, who doesn't much want to see the Worker Church Group expanding into another French movement, is prepared to believe that time will prove his judgment wrong.

But whereas the chaplains are now a thoroughly acceptable part of the Anglican Establishment, the worker-priests seem to be regarded by the top brass as a misguided, potentially subversive crew. There has, so far, been only one incident hinting at suppression. This was three years ago when Jack Strong left the parish of Harlington (Bedfordshire) at the suggestion of the Bishop of St Albans. The Bishop has never specified his reasons but a study of the Harlington case history makes it difficult to avoid the conclusion that he was responding to a handful of parishioners determined to rid themselves of a priest who did not conceal his impatience with humbug and who was a factory shop steward during his working week.

How nervous the Church is about the subject was plainly demonstrated at the press conference held by Mr Leslie Paul when his report on the deployment of the ministry was published last year; the Bishop of Lincoln trying desperately to head off Mr Paul's impromptu support of the worker-priesthood, and looking hot above the dog collar when he failed. Even venturesome Southwark is keeping its own clutch of worker-priests close to the cathedral rather than letting them loose in the parishes for fear they'll get themselves out on a limb as the French did.

THE chances are that nothing on the French scale will develop in the Church of England for a long time to come. For one thing, the worker-priests seem curiously disinclined to lobby for their point of view in Church quarters or to be eager to draw others into their group; it sometimes seems that they are preoccupied with working out their private salvations. For another, it is certainly true, as Ted Wickham argues, that the breach between the Church and the industrial masses is not the dramatic one that impelled French Catholic leaders to chance their arms. It is also true that it is not the way of the Anglican Church to embark on great crusades and, when they seem to be going amiss, to halt them with a hatchet blow of authority. It professes a taste for the slow fruition of the things in which it believes. And for the things in which it does not believe it resorts to a more formidable sanction than mere prohibition. It turns on the tap of studied indifference. It is doing this now in the case of its worker-priests.