

# Evangelism in Modern Industrial France

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## I

IN 1937 a book was published in France, with a preface by Cardinal Suhard, urging that a seminary should be started for home missions and that a society should be formed for the evangelization of pagan rural areas. By 1942 the seminary at Lisieux was training men for this work. They were instructed not only in theology but in manual labour, and they were taught to work in teams. The areas where they were sent were districts in which the effective Christian minority had disappeared and where most of the traces of Christian culture and standards had been effaced. At Lisieux to-day men are trained to work in towns rather than in country districts, and the spirit of the whole movement is typified in words of Cardinal Suhard written on the refectory walls. "I have not to search for the subject of my meditation. It is always the same. There is a wall which separates the Church from the masses; the wall must be broken down at whatever cost to give back to Christ the souls that are lost to him."<sup>1</sup> Related to the Mission de France, though kept distinct from it, is the Mission de Paris.<sup>2</sup>

In 1942 Henri Godin, who was working in the slums of Paris, applied to go to Lisieux as a part-time pupil. For seven years he had been a chaplain of the J.O.C. (Jeunesse Ouvriere Chretienne). The Jocist movement was started in the twenties to train young workers to win their fellow workers for Christ; but in spite of considerable success with these lay "militants", Abbé Godin was not satisfied that they were the answer to the problem of the pagan arrondissements of proletarian Paris. In 1943 Cardinal Suhard, then Archbishop of Paris, asked Abbé Godin with another Jocist chaplain, Abbé Daniel as collaborator, to draw up a report on the conditions of the working class in relation to the Church. This report was published under the title *France, Pays de Mission*, and an English translation is contained in Masie Ward's *France Pagan?*

The report draws attention, as the documents on the rural mission do, to vast areas where the Christian religion and Christian influence has been wholly eradicated and which should be treated as missionary territory. Here among a society of uprooted individuals an anarchy in faith and morals prevails, similar to that described by St. Paul in the first chapter of Romans, and the word "pagan" seems entirely justified. "Here they are pagans not knowing good from evil, following the stream, itself pagan, that is carrying them away."<sup>3</sup> Even in such a society the challenge of Godin's militants evoked a response;

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Bryan Green, *The Practice of Evangelism*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief account of what is happening in rural France, see David Watmough, *A Church Renascent* (S.P.C.K., 1951), pp. 72-89.

<sup>3</sup> *France Pagan*, p. 80.

some young men and girls were drawn to Christ, several were converted; but the experiment foundered on the almost impossible task of grafting the converts into the middle-class fellowship of the local church. They may have experienced grace but they had not the graces of respectable Christian people. A few conformed, but most soon lapsed and went back disillusioned to their old friends.

"There are moments when one is tempted to cry: 'No, my dear John; no, Robert; do not bring your friends who used to be Communists. We know they are looking for our Lord, but what do you expect us to do with them? They simply don't belong, they have not our ways and manners, they are too remote from us and they will soon be conscious of it. Don't bring us that young woman from your factory, François—even though you say she would be a real Saint Paul if she were converted. Or at least only bring her if she can be converted all of a piece and become presentable in her very first conversation'."<sup>1</sup>

Godin's great contribution is that he discovered that the problem of evangelism is the problem of community. "Young proletarians live in community; we must win them in groups; it is in clusters that they will cling to Christ, the living vine."<sup>2</sup> "You might think from some of our stories that individual conversions are the rule. There are such on higher proletarian levels, but the young of the real proletariat always go about in bands, and to possess the leader is to possess the band."<sup>3</sup> In such cases the Church is faced with a situation familiar to the modern missionary in a mass-movement area. This is fully borne out by Godin's friend, Abbé Michonneau, speaking from experience of evangelizing adults as well as adolescents.

"As Abbé Godin pointed out . . . the majority of our people think only collectively. Only a small percentage is capable of individual thought, and it is these who discuss and reflect on social and religious questions. The others, the great majority, are not aware of any personal capabilities along such lines; they are submerged in the vague 'personality' of the group in which they belong. They think as a unit and subscribe only to those ideas which the group holds, whether that group is their union, their fellow workers, their political party or their friends. Hence it is impossible to draw them to Christ as individuals. Either the whole group goes over to Him, or no one does. The conquest must be a collective one. That does not mean a conquest of the entire working class (which 'class' is an entity, but not a reality), but of this group, of this portion here and now."<sup>4</sup>

To win men in their groups is a slow procedure. It may take generations; but it is the method of the Mission de Paris and it may be that here is the key to the evangelization of the working class.

This does not mean, however, that Abbé Michonneau and his colleagues work for mass conversions of the groups with whom they come in contact. "Personal, individual adherence to the Christian

<sup>1</sup> op. cit., p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> *France Pagan*?, p. 147.

<sup>3</sup> op. cit., p. 148.

<sup>4</sup> *Revolution in a City Parish* (Blackfriars, 1949), p. 7. See also Max Warren, *The Christian Mission* (S.C.M. Press, 1951), pp. 72-79, for an English assessment of this kind of evangelism, and for commentary on this quotation.

way of life is what militants work for, because it is the only real conversion. Despite what we said about the necessity of working on the mass of men, and on social and economic groups as a whole, it still remains true that we must win each member of those groups as individuals."<sup>1</sup> The difference from other methods of evangelism is that in this case the convert is not taken out of his group and forced into a new social fellowship; he stays where he is as a leader and as an evangelist.

The result of the report *France, Pays de Mission* was that Cardinal Suhard determined to bring the "Mission de Paris" officially into existence. As Godin was no organizer, Abbé Hollande was made Superior. In preparation a month's conference was held at Lisieux in December, 1943. On January 13th, 1944, the mission was to be launched; on the same morning Godin was found dead on his bed, stifled by the fumes of a coal stove whose chimney was blocked up.

Godin's work has been continued in two directions after his death, directly in the work of the Mission de Paris with its team of priest-workmen, working like Godin outside the parochial set-up, and indirectly by the work of a missionary parish like that of the Sacré Coeur, Colombes.

## II

What has brought the Mission de Paris most publicity has been its employment of priest-workmen. The idea arose during the war when chaplains, excluded from labour camps for French workers transported to Germany, trained as engineers and were admitted to the camps as such. Fr. Henri Perrin has given a full account of this experiment in his *Priest-Workmen in Germany*.<sup>2</sup> One of these chaplains on joining the Mission de Paris requested Abbé Hollande to allow him to continue as a priest-workman. Others followed his example; Fr. Perrin and another Jesuit went to live in a Paris slum and work in a Paris factory. With headquarters in Godin's house the work of the Mission de Paris has developed along these lines under the direction of Abbé Hollande and with the blessing and encouragement of the late Cardinal Suhard.

Much that is ill-informed and sensational has unfortunately been published about this experiment, which has made the work itself more difficult. However, it may be said that there are two kinds of priest-workmen: those who aim at founding new parishes among the proletariat and those who are seeking to recreate confidence in the Church; among the latter are some Franciscan and Capuchin friars. There is also the work of the Petits Frères du Pere de Foucauld, whose influence is entirely indirect. They form no groups of inquirers, but simply work with, and pray for, their workmates.<sup>3</sup> The first type of priest-workmen make friends at work, some of whom eventually come back to their lodgings. Here Mass is celebrated in the evening on a kitchen table with the priest facing the people. After the service, time is given to questions. In this way 'para-churches' are formed,

<sup>1</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> Sheed and Ward, 1947.

<sup>3</sup> S. M. Gibbard, "Contemplatives in a Secularised World," *Theology*, April, 1952.

providing a catechumenate for those who are not yet prepared to enter the full fellowship of the parish church. Usually three priests live together, two go out to work and the third keeps house, but each takes his turn at looking after the other two. The priest-workmen realize that progress will be slow, and like Godin and Michonneau they are working in terms of generations in their attempt to win the proletariat for Christ.<sup>1</sup>

### III

In the parish of Sacré Coeur, Colombes, Abbé Michonneau has attempted to apply Godin's ideas within the parochial framework. This has involved on the one hand a bold attempt to make the parish itself a 'new-born' community looking to the Acts for its ideal, and on the other, a real endeavour to find a place in that community not just for a few working-class brands plucked from the burning, but for the whole community that lives within the parish boundaries.

"At Colombes we began, five years ago, to stress what would appeal to the working class, even though, now, you would not especially notice any such emphasis. We had to, because it was necessary to put the workers at ease in the church, and also to rid them of the notion that religion was a middle-class affair; moreover, if we expected them to make prayer a living part of their lives and sorrows and joys and needs, we had to bring in references to their factories and work and homes. In a working-class parish you must use working-class language."<sup>2</sup>

To make this new congregation part of a living Church, the principles of the continental liturgical revival have been invoked. This movement, which originated in Germany and Austria, is an attempt to make the Latin Mass intelligible to people who do not understand Latin and also to enable worshippers to pray the Mass with the priest, not just to say their own prayers at Mass. To-day in many churches on the continent the priest celebrates in the westward position facing the people, the Epistle and sometimes the Gospel are read in the vernacular, and a 'dialogue Mass' has been introduced with a second priest reading a commentary to the Latin service. Together with this more congregational worship has come a greater stress on the Bible and the preaching of biblical sermons. In the service itself the emphasis is becoming less on the 'sacrifice of the Mass' and more on the 'meal fellowship' of Christ's family. Also for the first time missals are being provided for the use of the laity, and the bringing in of private manuals of devotion is being discouraged.

When my wife and I visited Colombes two years ago we were impressed by the immense contrast between the service there and the High Mass we had attended in another part of France the previous Sunday. Both churches were full, but at Colombes instead of the bustle and noise of people going in and out, and the service at the altar seeming distant and remote, the congregation were quiet and whole-hearted in their worship. There was also a marked absence of fuss

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller account of the work of priest-workmen, see Watmough, *A Church Renascent*, pp. 46-52.

<sup>2</sup> Michonneau, *op. cit.*, pp. 42, 3.

and ceremonial and much to remind us of a Sung Celebration in an Anglican church of the central tradition. At some other services, I understand, rich ceremonial is employed. On entering the church we were given a copy of Godin's Missal, *Avec le Christ*, in which the whole service is set out with the Latin and French on opposite pages and some parts of the service illustrated by simple drawings. The altar was placed in the nave and the priest celebrated facing the people; another priest read the Epistle, the Gospel and the French commentary from the pulpit. At several points in the service the people responded in French, but where Latin was familiar (as at the Sanctus) Latin was retained. A large black and white poster, pinned on the side of the pulpit, told us that the subject of the sermon was "God and Money", and below were printed the biblical references to St. Luke xvi and St. Matthew vi. The sermon itself, preached by Abbé Michonneau, was a simple exposition of the teaching contained in these two chapters, to which he added the parable of the rich fool and a lesson from the life of Francis Xavier. A large number of the congregation communicated, and the service ended with the singing similar in style and fervour to the best the C.S.S.M. has given us. The aim is a hundred per cent communicating attendance.

Other features of the work of this missionary parish closely resemble those of enterprising parishes in this country. The evangelistic opportunities of the occasional offices are used to the full, and special services which will draw outsiders are fixed for special Sundays. At these something is always given for the congregation to do, for instance on Mothers' Day, at the Offertory, the mothers come up, and have photographs of their children placed on the altar.<sup>1</sup> The parish magazine is free and has the 'outsider', not the churchgoer, chiefly in mind. "The average working man is a thorough reader, and he attaches more importance than we do to the written word. Hence the care that we take to present truth in a telling way may be rewarded by the return to Christ of our readers."<sup>2</sup>

The laity are taken into full partnership and their function as an apostolate to their fellows is integral to the whole mission. "We are not trying to patch up the ills of the world around us; we are trying to rebuild it completely. For that we need real militants who will fill their surroundings with the spirit of Christ, so that men and women will want to know and follow this Christ. We are not interested in gaining recruits for our church services, but we are passionately concerned in gaining recruits for Christ. The creation of this new and revolutionary Christian atmosphere depends on the common efforts of each and every Christian. . . . Every man has his own little world to influence, to change, to christianize. That is what we must do as united individuals."<sup>3</sup>

So much of this is familiar to us in England that important differences may be overlooked. In the first place, the work at Colombes is much more long-term than anything so far attempted in this country. "Society is not a mass of individuals, but an organism which requires

<sup>1</sup> op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> op. cit., pp. 100-101.

institutions and leaders ; and Christianity itself is something more than a mere ticket to salvation. God's plan of salvation is built on the nature He gave us, rooted in the humanity with which He created us. Consequently, if some souls can be saved to-day in this pagan society, then many more can be saved tomorrow in a Christian one. This plan says that we must build for the future, even though our work will take years upon years."<sup>1</sup>

The plan of campaign for the last four years shows the pace at which they are working. The first year was devoted to preaching 'the apostolate' and training faithful laity for work in the different districts into which the parish was divided. The whole of the second year was given to organizing for the third, when the home meetings began. It was not till the fourth year that a district mission was held lasting a fortnight. During the first week all the parish staff visited in the area and 'talked religion'; there were home meetings in the evening and during the second week services in church; sermons were followed by tableaux in which the events of the Passion were depicted, and a direct appeal was then made. "They were not immediately, nor always, converted, but for many of them it was the first time they had heard the word of God. That was something. We had taken down names and addresses of all present, and we followed up this contact."<sup>2</sup>

A second difference is ruthlessness with regard to organizations. Every detail of parish life is directed to the winning of outsiders. In the evangelistic teams "we avoid regimentation, lest zeal die."<sup>3</sup> Here is something that is very relevant to our English situation. So also is the fact that they do not allow wool to be pulled over their eyes because of success with children's work. "When the men lost interest in religion, we concentrated on women; when adolescents began to abandon us, we made intense efforts to keep the little ones around us. They are easier to handle and more receptive. Woe to us . . . if we narrow the limits of the kingdom of God to the point that it only includes the little ones."<sup>4</sup> Is it only in the Church of Rome that more time is given to work among children and adolescents than to the winning of their parents to Christ?

A further difference is that the priests at Colombes seem to have really identified themselves with their people. "We are in a working-class parish, and so we try to have our furnishings and their arrangement simple and ordinary; if they are luxurious, none of our people will feel at home. If they do not feel at home, they will not come back, and we shall not be able to influence them as we might have done. . . . In any case, our quarters should never be sumptuous and ornate, for our lives should be a reflection of Christ's and not a denial of it."<sup>5</sup> To live in this way is, of course, easier for celibate clergy, but there is a lesson for all who work in working-class areas. Both in this book and

<sup>1</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>3</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> *op. cit.*, pp. 71, 72.

Michonneau, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

in the pamphlet by Bishop Ancel on "The Working-Class Mentality"<sup>1</sup> there is revealed a real attempt of clergy to declass themselves and to enter into other ways of life and of thought.

To all this it must be added that the work at Colombes is the work of a team of priests and laity, and Abbé Michonneau thinks that nothing could be achieved without such a team.\* It seems that here is an argument for those who favour larger parishes, with a staff working together, as against the usual one-man parishes into which our industrial areas are now mostly divided.

#### IV

The relevance of the missionary parish to our English situation needs no underlining, but there are some who say that the French extra-parochial experiments are unnecessary here. They point out that anti-clericalism, which is strong in France, is almost non-existent in this country, that the gulf between the Church and the workers is nothing like as great, and that the parochial system still works well. What is needed, they affirm, is not so much 'priest-workmen' as 'priest-clergymen'.

There is much to be said for this point of view. The parochial system is working well in many middle-class parishes, in some working-class parishes in new housing areas, and in a few well-established working-class parishes. In such parishes parochial missions and other ventures proceeding along the lines suggested in *Towards the Conversion of England* are achieving some modicum of success. But where the parochial system is hardly working at all, and where there does seem room for experiment, is in the 'down-town' parishes of our large industrial cities. From such parishes the young and the enterprising have largely departed. Either they have 'bettered themselves' and live in the suburbs, or they have moved to one of the new estates. The tragedy is that many former Church members come back regularly to their old church, and what is more tragic hold office on its council. This is a tragedy because the Church, instead of becoming a worshipping community, degenerates into an Old Boys' Club for people whose real links are not with the present but with the past. It would be interesting to take a census of congregations in such parishes and to discover how many of the congregation live in the parish and also how many work in the industries of the district.

In such areas, and in industry generally, anti-clericalism as found in France scarcely exists, but the parson and his message count for nothing; they are just irrelevant to the thought and way of life of the worker. Many English workers still claim the title 'Christian', but by Christian they mean they try to be good neighbours; their faith has little to do with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and nothing at all to do with the organized religion of Christ's Church. The gulf between the Church and the worker may not be as great as in France but it is a good deal wider than many of us suppose. Clergy and ordinands who have worked in industry have found this. Further,

<sup>1</sup> Watmough, *A Church Renascent*, contains a translation.

\* *op. cit.*, p. 167ff.

the proportion of practising Christians in the average factory is minute, something like one per cent.

The French have understood the worker better than we have and are producing 'militants' who really count among their fellows. Bishop Stephen Neill once said that whereas in the nineteenth century the working-class virtues most highly prized were thrift, sobriety and diligence, to-day they have been replaced by generosity, camaraderie and loyalty to one's class. "The word 'comrade'," writes Godin, "has a content for the workman that we are far from understanding".<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately of the few Christian workers in industry in this country, many exemplify the virtues of the past, not of the present, and their workmates complain that they are aloof and censorious.

Several things can and might be done to meet this situation. The industrial mission in Sheffield has three full-time chaplains who go into steel works and gather groups round them while the steel cools off. When contact has been established in this way an attempt is made to form some sort of 'para-church' on the French model. This method might apply to other industries where there is delay in the nature of the work itself, as at the docks; but they could not be applied to most other industries. Perhaps manual workers who apply for ordination should be encouraged to remain laymen and for two years or more to seek employment in the same firm. Or there may be a place for priest-workmen here; an account of a brave first attempt can be found in *Priest-Workman in England*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *France Pagan?*, p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> Reviewed on p 109 of this issue.

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