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Worker Priests: Saints in Hell **by Gilbert Cesbron**

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Committee was never actually constituted, and the task remained undone. As a consequence the "official" translation does not exist.

In its stead this private Franciscan version of the Old Testament has been published, and a translation of the New Testament is in preparation by the same translators. Undoubtedly the words of praise and gratitude addressed by the Plenary Council to those who had already translated parts of the Bible would be repeated today, greatly amplified, to the diligent and courageous men of the Duns Scotus Biblical Institute, and particularly to their director, Fr. Allegra, O.F.M., as well as to his enlightened and far-seeing Superiors.

RICARDO ARCONADA

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¹ The eight volumes were published between 1946 and 1954, almost one volume per year; the first three volumes were published in Peking, the remaining five in Hongkong, where the translators took refuge before the Communist occupation of the North Capital.

² *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 26 (1934) 315; 35 (1943) 270.

³ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 35 (1943) 309-310.

⁴ *Primum Concilium Sinense*, anno 1924 (Shanghai, 1930), no. 35.

WORKER PRIESTS

SAINTS IN HELL. By Gilbert Cesbron. Translated from the French by John Russell. New York: Doubleday. 1954. Pp. 312. \$3.75

The small body of French priests, less than a hundred in all, who after the war entered upon the hazardous and heroic experiment of the worker-priests, have quickened the imagination of Europe and America to an altogether astounding degree. In a time of unparalleled moral and political chaos, their courage moved like a new breath of the Spirit; they carried into the spiritual underground of France a Good News that was all the better for being uttered in their sweat and patience.

The great idea was born at a time when greatness seemed lost, and ideas had degenerated into that sort of philosophizing every good Frenchman has come to be ashamed of. From Abbé Godin to Cardinal Suhard the idea took form and was launched. Within a few years of the war's close, the workers who were priests could be found in the Renault assembly lines, in the mines of the north, in the Lyon silk factories and on the docks of Bordeaux.

Their aim was simplicity itself. Where the Church had been absent, they were to be present, as her men. Where the Church had died of inanition or indifference, or lived on merely as a vague tribal echo, they were to restore substance. The soul of France, lost in an iniquitous history of Masonry, wars, injustice and bickering, was their quarry.

So they hired out to the bosses, signed up for the eight, ten, twelve-hour day; took a room in a slum neighborhood where they could be with other workers, said Mass when and where they could: in the evening, at midnight, in a kitchen, with no one at all present, or among a congregation made up of the curious, the communist, the sinner, the hidden saint. And at times, if one can trust the reports, in the early days, an unidentified guest would slip in at the back, after Mass had begun, and kneel with the rest. He was Emmanuel Cardinal Suhard, come in lay clothing to pray with and for his flock.

In such a maelstrom, great men were tossed to the crest and lesser men sank. Godin saw his first priests in the factories, and himself died, devoured by love and hope, before his fortieth year. Cardinal Suhard, who in his last years never knew a night's untroubled sleep, saw God give a joy to his age which He had denied his youth; and he is dead. But the priests worked on. Only, here and there, ugly and unpredictable, the stormy night of France would be sheared by a lightning-bolt of event, and the works of men would stand mercilessly revealed. By Christmas of 1953 the situation had clarified somewhat; those who hold authority from Christ for the good of the Church had reached a decision. The worker-priest movement, undertaken from the beginning on a purely experimental basis, was to cease temporarily, while certain necessary adjustments were made.

It had been discovered, among other things, that the physical hazards of the worker's life were too grievous to be borne for any length of time by a priest. It was realized that the hole-and-corner existence, its stresses and psychological demands, were wearing down their resistance in important areas of attitude and responsibility. It was observed that their sympathy for the hopeless, beyond praise in most cases, had passed over by a kind of osmosis to a Marxian mentality.

A medical doctor of Paris, who at the order of the Cardinal had made a physical examination of several of the worker-priests

there, published the shocking report that he had never encountered a more complete condition of exhaustion since he had cared for the victims of Nazi prison camps.

The decision of Rome struck at France as no event had done since the Liberation. A whole bewildering spectrum of political and religious thought focused at last on the achievement of these men. *Figaro* and *L'Humanité* sat the newsstands together, a very lion and lamb in company; one could scan an editorial of the extreme Left, and one of Mauriac, and find them in agreement; in bistros and in the National Assembly the debate, the praise, the bitterness, the consensus. It was as though at the exhausted end of her night, France had found some reason to awaken and arise, and with all the passion of her forgotten identity, was making a desperate gesture in the direction of her own destiny.

But a nation's meat can also be her poison. Another way of saying that the very voices raised in this right cause were raised, in an astounding number of cases, for all the wrong reasons. These worker-priests, whose motives had begun in absolute singleness, whose dedication was beyond question — all their lives and labors could be twisted in the cruelest direction, used for the most iniquitous ends. So it came about that the Communists used the worker-priests as a weapon to belabor Rome, that prominent laymen could air their own stupidities and emoting, that groups within and without the Church could raise a cry of phylacterial righteousness, since in all the bitter years of the experiment, their own hands had been in every sense immaculate.

So the worker-priests, who had come not to judge but to redeem, found that no redeemer escapes judgement.

But in their health, the sickness of France stood diagnosed. In contrast to their purity of effort, her labyrinth of futile and selfish debate; in contrast to their love, her refusals, her distrusts, her schisms; against their priesthood, her apostasy; against their labors, her troubled sleep.

It has become clear of course, as it would have been clear from the beginning to any dispassionate observer, that the decision to halt the experiment was in no sense meant to quench it. Both before and after Rome spoke, thoughtful men had been at work considering what adjustments could be adopted. Such models as the Little Brothers of Charles de Foucauld were studied for the vast experience they had accumulated in a similar apostolate. The seminary

of the *Mission de France*, a parallel case, was reopened after a rewriting of its rule. The center, also under the inspiration of Godin and Suhard, had occupied itself since the war with preparation of priests toward the rural apostolate.

But the problem of the restoration of the work-priests within an acceptable and effective structure was quite complex. How would their mobility, their admirable identification with their people, be retained without danger to the substance of the priesthood? How, practically, could a priest labor among laborers in mines or factories of whatever type, when he is now limited by the new ruling, to some three or four hours a day? Or again: can he live in an already existing parish house, or in community with other worker-priests, without at the same time being stigmatized by the suspicious and the pagan? These were formidable questions, and only loving perseverance and obedience could hope to answer them. In the interim, while they were being discussed, the love and admiration of the Church kept watch. A concept of such daring, of such sacrifice, of such love, would not easily die. The disciples of the great visionaries Godin and Suhard were waiting to bring a second generation to birth.

It is against this exciting recent history that the novel *Saints in Hell* was written. The novel is therefore in a first sense, a topical one; it was born of a situation men are living with; its characters are weighted with all that burden of fury, poverty and love which the worker-priests and their people bear. But it would be unjust to stop here. What makes *Saints in Hell* great and good is not a newspaper formula, but a sense of life; it is alive in its own right. Where sin abounded, grace does more abound; and the grace, as the sin, is incarnated in men and women who would be recognizable under any sky.

As the novel opens, Father Pierre, the son of a mine worker, has come to the factory district of Paris to join with another priest in his life of labor and apostolate. From there, a day-by-day account emerges; his grinding factory day, his friends, his neighborhood; the renegades, the outcasts, the intelligent disillusioned who come to his door, and find it open to them. Soon after Pierre's arrival, his priest companion abandons the work, overcome by the twin pressures of exhaustion and fear for his own soul; and Pierre is left alone; alone perhaps more radically than the loneliest missionary, since he faces that new paganism so mercilessly analyzed by Godin; a subtle poisonous blend of hopelessness and rejection.

It is Pierre's mistakes which undo him; and the mistakes, in any Catholic's log, could not be called inconsiderable. He is accused of neglecting his interior life. Passionately convinced as he is of the justice and need of his own work, he has little but criticism for the parish priests around him. He attends ambiguous political gatherings, and addresses those present in a way that gives substance to rumor. In the meantime, the Cardinal (evidently Suhard) had died, and his successor (just as evidently Feltin) calls Pierre to an accounting. As the book ends, a decision has been reached to remove Pierre from a situation which is constituting a double danger; it is debilitating his own spiritual life, and it is turning his flock in a direction in which the Church can never yield.

It is precisely this point of priestly responsibility which evokes the book's finest moments. Can the priest in any sense, at any point of decision, consider himself a 'private' man, entitled to act in a way that involves himself and others in departures from established norms? The fine perilous line between conscience and obedience is the theme of the novel; and the theme has seldom been more delicately and surely exploited.

Pierre is removed, and submits; but the worker-priests have not died. It is one more evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in His Church, viewing time *sub specie aeternitatis*, that the magnificent daring of men of vision has received a hearing. "My name is Lazarus, and I live." And the great ideas of men endure in that measure in which they share eternity; because they have undergone a death which tested their life, and which sloughed off their accretion of human selfishness.

In Lyon, the resurrection has occurred. Two priests and two lay-brothers, under the Auxiliary of the diocese, will now live together in a community. The priests will be part-time workers, the brothers full-time; and the Bishop will be a worker too, in some craft that will allow him time to govern and to plan a future upon which the eyes and heart of the whole Church rest.

And at Pontigny, about sixty miles south of Paris, at the site of an ancient Cistercian Abbey, the dead have also risen. There, shortly before Christmas, the Bishop of Lille took possession of a kind of prelature; and at the same time he appointed a thirty-seven-year-old priest of his diocese to serve as the first Vicar General of the Mission of the worker-priests. And during the Mass, a quiet voice drowned out forever the sowers of discord and

the false witnesses; it was the reading of a telegram from Rome, signed with the name of Peter, expressing the confidence of the Vicar of Christ in the mission of his beloved sons, and giving them his Apostolic blessing. Once again, sin too has been made to serve.

DANIEL J. BERRIGAN

STUDY GUIDE

SUCCESS. The Ateneo Study Guide. Adapted by Joseph L. Roche, S.J. from *Do It Right* by Paul A. Reed, S.J. Society of St. Paul, Pasay City. Pp. 55.

As a student goes through high school he frequently receives suggestions on the right method of study. Here is a booklet which aims to give a right study method in a systematic and detailed way. It gives not only time-tested principles but also minute practical directions. Directions are given as to the best place, a definite time for study, the order in which the various subjects are to be taken up and amount of time to be allotted to each. The student-reader of this booklet may discover, perhaps for the first time, the folly of day-dreaming, the different rates of speed in reading; he will be thankful for the wise rules for memorizing, for making outlines and summaries; he will be consoled at the thought that, with the use of the right method, "invincible" Mathematics can be conquered.

A valuable asset of this booklet is its emphasis on right motives and correct attitudes in study. For example the student is told: "Don't make the time of recitation a contest between yourself and the teacher—work *with* him."

An objection to this Study Guide may arise: "There are too many suggestions. The student will be confused." The booklet contains an answer: "You will find a number of good suggestions by reading along, *but don't try to adopt all of them at once.*" *Divide et impera!*

The language of the booklet is too difficult for many high school students, at least for those in first and second years. This can be remedied if the teacher explains the contents to his class.