

THE INSTITUTE AND THE ORIGINS OF THE

J.O.C. (YOUNG CHRISTIAN WORKERS) - (2)

The work of Father Fichaux led to two important developments which illustrate how God makes his presence felt among underprivileged people in ways that humanly speaking are unexpected.

The first arose from the realisation that, during the holidays, many seminarists, most of them late vocations, could not go home. Father Fichaux turned a house over to them near Paris at Marnes la Coquette, and this enabled them to get to know each other, take their first steps together as ministers of the Church, adapt to a new set of cultural values and continue to benefit from the source of spiritual energy which set them on the road to the priesthood.

The other development was of a more social nature. In the period before and after the first World War, the suburbs of Paris had spilled over first into the area of the former city defences and then beyond. What used to be simply neighbouring villages were swamped by a series of jerry-built housing developments and soon became hastily thrown-together towns without any of the basic amenities. During the period 1920-30, Father Lhande described the saga of the pioneer priests sent out into the "bush" in such books as "Christ in the Suburbs" and "The Cross on the City Walls". The priests of the St. Labre Association, themselves drawn from poverty stricken districts, found it easy to identify with the people around them, convinced that these rejected people would welcome the Good News if only they saw it lived by people just like them.

It was against this background that the JOC was born. In 1926, a priest who had been ordained at the age of 34, and had been working in the Clichy parish in the west of Paris for only two years, heard about the work of a Belgian priest, a certain Father Cardjin. Georges Guerin was of true St. Labre stock. He was a member and on the council of the St. Ambrose branch of the Association; he trained as an apprentice and then worked as a metal assayer between the ages of 14 and 20; he was the union delegate of the CFTC; and he was close to the Sillon group. He served throughout the whole of the first World War, and was one of the stalwarts who kept the summer house for seminarists going. He was so impressed by what he had seen of the JOC in Belgium that he wasted no time in starting a small group consisting of 4 young workers. The movement was launched! He had suffered so much as a layman and as a young priest on seeing the increasing dechristianisation of young working class people that he could not bear to wait. Like Charles Fichaux, he was self-effacing and determined. He communicated the burning zeal he felt to priests who were his brothers by reason of the common path they had trodden to become priests, and who battled

bravely in their clubs in Paris or in the suburbs. The resounding success of the JOC in the Paris area was due very much to these reasons; to the fact that here were priests who were convinced that these poor people could be evangelised, because they had been born among them and their lives as Christians and as priests had been deeply influenced by them. With the support of the diocesan pastoral commission run by Fathers Gerlier and Courbe, Georges Guerin was able to harness on a national level the cooperation of another St. Labre, Father Charles Bordet. And the rest is history...

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The irony is that the success of this development damaged the St. Labre Association quite severely: it was no longer the only spiritual driving force behind the mass trades union movement that the CFTC had become. What is more, the success of specialised movements was so extensive that they quite naturally began to absorb the apostolic zeal of many priests. It is perhaps worth noting at this point that during the events of 1936, Christians took their place in the thick of the workers' struggle, even if they had jobs, and non-Christian workers began to accept them as being totally committed to the common cause.

And so a new situation had been created... "Those who believe in God and those who do not, fight side by side for the same causes, for justice and human dignity, each inspired by his faith or his ideology; and in the process there grows mutual esteem and distinctions between motives become less clear. The impact of the Gospel through word and example will be powerful as never before among the working class".

The St. Labre Association would continue to survive, but only through the loyalty of its remaining members, married men now with families who, in 1982, would celebrate the centenary of the Association. The original dynamic inspiration, however, was to be found in the JOC movement.

A few words about this movement might be useful at this point. The early JOC members who had married and set up home did not want to lose their initial fervour for "bringing their brothers back to the faith". After 1935, they launched the Christian Workers League (LOC). At that time it consisted of a small group of very apostolically minded adults. Soon, following the collapse of France in 1940, they had the problems of the occupation to face: the predicament of wives whose husbands were prisoners;

the difficulty of supplying food to the large cities... Being realists and close to the people living in their district, they formed associations with their neighbours, whether they were believers or not, in an attempt to find some answers. Soon they realised the name of their association was inappropriate since its members now consisted of anyone willing to help, whatever his religious beliefs. And so they named their group The Workers Family Movement (MPF), and by 1943, in the town of Clichy alone there were 2.000 families which has joined. The extraordinary mixture of people (their critics called them the MPF idiots) enabled Christians to show their fellow workers a solidarity of concern not seen before. In the same way, when the JOC had to face the needs of young people at the time of the Liberation, it created innumerable Workers Mutual Help Teams. These lasted for only a short time: with the return to France of people from forced labour camps, prisoners, deportees, many young people joined the surge to found families at long last. But what potential for adult Christian action! And what a difference those hard years in Germany had made: all the various pre-war labels and categories had disappeared, and now one bore witness to one's faith through the simple performance of everyday actions.

By 1946, the MPF was asking the Hierarchy not to be officially considered as a specifically Catholic action movement, even though it did provide small "Christian life groups" for its Christian members... It was not a very clear-cut situation, but it was resolved in 1950 with the foundation of the Catholic Workers Movement (ACO). The result of this new creation –the fruit of episcopal support and the determination of movement activists –was that the JOC, which continued to be a movement for fully committed young Christian workers, now had a very useful, similarly orientated adult partner. If one bears in mind the fact that about this time the Worker Priests came into existence, one is led to see in all these different happenings the dawning of the notion of the "People of God" which Vatican II in its "Lumen Gentium" constitution would proclaim as one of the best definitions of the Church of Jesus Christ. A truly Gospel paradox: it was among the working class, noted for its anticlericalism and so long undervalued or feared by the clergy, that the first attempts were made to bring about a situation in which the work of the baptised laity complemented that of the clergy –a true "mission" to spread the Good News.

The words of the First Epistle to the Corinthians (1, 26-29) come to mind: "Take yourselves for instance, brothers, at the time when you were called: how many of you were wise in the ordinary sense of the word, how many were influential people, or came from noble families? No, it was to shame the wise that God chose what was foolish by human reckoning, and to shame what is strong that he chose what is weak by human reckoning; those that the world considers common and contemptible are the ones that God has chosen... The human race has nothing to boast about to God."

We should note, however, that these things become clear only with time: when St. John Baptist de La Salle founded the Brothers of the Christian Schools, at the end of the 17th century, he could not foresee who would inherit his work. His Congregation, bruised like so many others by the anticlericalism of the beginning of the 20th century, planted a spiritual leaven among working class people which, in the name of the Gospel, was able to give rise to a host of young workers, despite their inherited class bitterness towards the clergy.

And so, from its very beginnings the JOC was rooted in the working class and the Christian fabric of our country, and drew its strength from both. It is the offspring of both the working class and the Church of Jesus Christ.

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(1) Born in Paris of Savoyard parents who had come to the capital at the beginning of the century to find work. A pupil of the Brothers. Between the ages of 15 and 21, he worked for an insurance firm, was a group leader in his club, belonged to the CFTC trades union, and was a member of the St. Labre Association. Went to the House for Priests at Marnes as a late vocation. Ordained priest in 1939. Worked as a curate then assigned to the Workers Mission at the diocesan pastoral centre. Was the co-ordinator of the first Missionary Sector (la Boucle). Member of the Workers Mission Secretariat from the time of its foundation in 1957. Bishop on the Episcopal Committee for the Workers Mission from 1967 to 1981. Belongs fully to the tradition of lay people and priests described in this article.