

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“The Deeds You Do. . .”: The Worker Priest Movement in France, 1946–1954

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Abstract

The worker priest movement in France between 1946 and 1954 was a significant attempt by the Catholic Church to reach out to the increasingly alienated working class. It foundered on the rocks of elite opposition, worker priest embracing of class conflict, Cold War currents of thought, and government willingness to sacrifice the movement in the name of collaboration with Rome on a suite of issues, most notably free education. The historiography of the movement has proven similarly complex, with observers allowing contemporary trends and values to color their perception of this unique moment in French history and remembering and forgetting both playing a role in the image of the worker priests handed down to future generations.

Keywords: Worker priests; France; Catholicism; Fourth Republic

I. Introduction

St. Francis’s maxim that “The deeds you do may be the only sermon some persons will hear today” encapsulates the view that, in order to reach people who have become alienated from the Christian faith, it is necessary, not only preach the Gospel but to act in ways that reflect its values. Launched in 1946, the worker priest initiative in France represented a bold attempt to address the disaffection of the *menu peuple* from the Catholic Church. By sending young priests into working-class areas and encouraging them to work and live among those engaged in manual labor, the Church was heeding Francis’s advice, in the hope of breaking down the barriers that prevented the laboring class from embracing faith. Initial results exceeded expectation, with many workers gaining respect for the men who lived and worked as they did. However, a combination of factors led to the movement’s downfall.

Successive generations of scholars have brought new elements of the worker priest movement to light.¹ In the process, an orthodox interpretation of the movement’s

¹Jean-Claude Poulain and Émile Poulat, two worker priests, were first to devote serious attention to the movement with *Les prêtres-ouvriers* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1954). The first attempt at a synthesis of crucial primary documents in English was John Petrie, trans. *The Worker Priests* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954). Émile Poulat returned to the field with *Naissance des prêtres-ouvriers* (Tournai: Casterman, 1965). The 1980s saw a new wave of interest with Oscar Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working*

rise and fall has crystalized. One of the key elements of this orthodoxy is that the worker priests fell victim to mounting concerns in Rome that the young priests were being co-opted by Marxism. This view emphasizes the actions of the pope, Pius XII, and his Nuncio, Mgr. Paolo Marella. With the tenth anniversary of Pope Francis's accession upon us and the seventieth anniversary of the condemnation of the movement coming in 2024, it seemed like an opportune moment to reconsider the worker priests' story, to add detail and nuance to the explanation of how an initiative aligned with St. Francis's dictum flourished and then declined amidst the turmoil of Fourth Republic France.

II. The Birth of the Movement

Much has been written about the desire to forget after the experience of the Vichy regime in World War II.² However, in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, it was difficult to forget. The Catholic Church had initially supported Marshal Pétain's government, particularly as it promised to retrench traditional values. However, as time passed, and the demands of the occupier became more and more noxious, there were Catholics (usually younger ones) who sought to oppose the enemy. Some became active *résistants*; others accompanied conscripted workers into Nazi Germany during the *Service du travail obligatoire* (STO). This experience proved formative for some who subsequently became involved in the worker priest movement.³

It is important to point out that the Vichy experience was not the sole tributary that fed the worker priest movement, however. The Dominican Jacques Loew is often cited as the first worker priest, but there were other examples of this sort of apostolate in the inter-war period. As early as 1923, two Jesuits, Jean Boulrier and Jacques Laurent, requested permission to work in a factory; this permission was denied. Between 1933 and 1934, Dominicans Albert Bouche and Bernard Rouzet took up manual labor on a temporary basis. And in June 1939, Hadrien Bousquet, of the Franciscans, began working at the forges in Ivry with the approval of his superior as well as Cardinal Verdier, then Archbishop of Paris.⁴

It is also fair to say that the worker priest movement had a much longer ancestry in French Catholicism. Leo XIII's ground-breaking encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which appeared in 1891, was a critical event in the Church's attempt to address social issues. In it the Pontiff remarked on the rising spirit of revolutionary change:

Class Blue (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1986) and François Leprieux, *Quand Rome condamne. Dominicains et prêtres-ouvriers* (Paris: Plon/Le Cerf, 1989). In the last twenty years, the publishing house Karthala has been at the forefront of efforts to understand the movement, with publications including: Charles Suaud and Nathalie Viet-Depaule, *Prêtres et ouvriers: Une double fidélité mise à l'épreuve 1944–1969* (Paris: Karthala, 2004); and Tangi Cavalin and Nathalie Viet-Depaule, *Une histoire de la mission de France: La riposte missionnaire 1941–2002* (Karthala: Paris, 2007).

²See Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); W. D. Halls, *Politics, Society and Christianity in Vichy France* (Oxford: Berg, 1995) and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), esp. 149–165.

³Emil Bondu was conscripted into the STO in Frankfurt between 1943 and 1945. Roger Breistroffer was in the STO in the Paris region in 1944. Bernard Cagne fought with the Maquis in 1944 (see Suaud and Viet-Depaule, *Prêtres et ouvriers*, 29–32).

⁴See Francis Gayral, "Quelque notes histoire PO," in *Courrier PO* (avril 2022), 10. Bousquet was among those who served as clandestine chaplains during World War II (see Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 59) and wrote *Hors des Barbelés* (Paris: Spes, 1945), which remains one of the best depictions of life under the STO.

The elements of the conflict now raging are unmistakable, in the vast expansion of industrial pursuits and the marvellous discoveries of science; in the changed relations between masters and workmen; in the enormous fortunes of some few individuals, and the utter poverty of the masses; the increased self reliance and closer mutual combination of the working classes; as also, finally, in the prevailing moral degeneracy. The momentous gravity of the state of things now obtaining fills every mind with painful apprehension; wise men are discussing it; practical men are proposing schemes; popular meetings, legislatures, and rulers of nations are all busied with it – actually there is no question which has taken deeper hold on the public mind.⁵

Interestingly, this foundational document for progressive Catholics, while acknowledging the precarious state of the working class, stops short of prescribing a complete redistribution of wealth. Leo XII insists that “The great mistake made in regard to the matter now under consideration is to take up with the notion that class is naturally hostile to class, and that the wealthy and the working men are intended by nature to live in mutual conflict.”⁶ It was this very issue – the extent to which capitalism needed to be recast in order to ameliorate the conditions of the working class – on which the worker priest movement would founder.

The immediate impact of *Rerum Novarum* in France (and across Europe) was felt in a flourishing of works designed to address the social question.⁷ These early attempts to promote mutual understanding between bourgeois and working class in France were important steps, though still characterized by an attitude in which good Catholics were “going to the people” (*aller au peuple*) rather than “becoming people” (*se faire peuple*). There was, however, one movement inspired by Leo XIII’s encyclical that was markedly different. This was the Sillon, launched by Marc Sangnier in 1894.⁸

More than any of the other initiatives inspired by *Rerum Novarum*, the spirit of the Sillon best approximated the ethos of the worker priests some fifty years later. As this movement gained momentum, it evolved increasingly in a progressive direction. It was not unusual for Sangnier to share the stage with figures from the French left. Thus, in 1905 he engaged in a public debate with Jules Guesde, journalist, deputy for Roubaix, and among the founders of the French section of the Workers’ International.⁹ Throughout his career, Sangnier championed causes that were well in advance of most Catholics. He was among the first to advocate for Franco–German reconciliation, he welcomed the Popular Front government of Léon Blum and he participated in the big tent peace movement, the *Rassemblement universel pour la Paix* (RUP).¹⁰

⁵*Rerum Novarum*, Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on Capital and Labor; available at https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html.

⁶*Rerum Novarum*, Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII.

⁷See for example Paul Misner, *Catholic Labour Movements in Europe: Social Thought and Action 1914–1965* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 2015).

⁸For Sangnier, see Gearóid Barry’s fascinating study *The Disarmament of Hatred: Marc Sangnier, French Catholicism and the First World War, 1914–45* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Another useful source is Madeleine Barthélemy-Madaule, *Marc Sangnier 1873–1950* (Paris: Éditions du Deuil, 1973). Interestingly, Jean Vinatier, a worker priest himself, was the long-time president of an association dedicated to the appreciation of Sangnier.

⁹Barthélemy-Madaule, *Marc Sangnier*, 121–122.

¹⁰For Sangnier’s efforts to promote reconciliation with Germany see Peter Farrugia, “French Religious Opposition to War, 1919–1939: The Contribution of Henri Roser and Marc Sangnier,” *French History* 6,

There was one final way in which Sangnier prepared the ground for the worker priests: his role as *éveilleur* for a generation of young Catholics. A number of those who played significant roles in the rise and fall of the worker priest movement were influenced in profound ways by Sangnier. These included George Fonsegrive, whose fiction chronicled the lives of the worker priests, and Georges Bidault, a leading figure in the *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* (MRP), of which Sangnier was made Honorary Chair prior to it assuming a central role in the politics of the Fourth Republic.¹¹

Returning to the immediate aftermath of World War II, not everyone had the transformative experience of working alongside their working-class countrymen during the War. They might well have come through the war years without a heightened sense of the chasm that had developed between the Church and the laboring class had it not been for the efforts of one man: Emmanuel Cardinal Suhard. After taking charge as Archbishop of Rheims in 1930, Suhard had quickly been convinced of the dire state, both economic and spiritual, of the proletarian class, and he came to reject “the view that European culture was [necessarily] Christian.”¹² Ten years later, upon his accession to the bishopric of Paris, Suhard decided to use the lessons of Rheims to combat irreligion among the masses. This task would necessitate new institutions and new energy. In 1942, Suhard founded the Mission de France, which was headquartered in Lisieux and had as its mandate the training of missionaries to evangelize France.¹³

This was a bold step. However, Suhard wanted to intensify interest in the problem of dechristianization and demonstrate that the Church was in the process of responding to it with energy and creativity. He encouraged two former chaplains connected to the *Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne*, Henri Godin and Yann Daniel, to conduct a fuller investigation into the problem of working-class disaffection. The result was the booklet, *France, pays de mission?* which sent shockwaves reverberating throughout French Catholicism. The authors began with the provocative assumption that France was now a mission field requiring special attention. They further maintained that “the task of conversion must be milieu directed rather than individualistically oriented.” Finally, they insisted that “the entire parish structure was so permeated with bourgeois values and practices that it could no longer serve a missionary function among workers.”¹⁴

no. 3 (September 1992): 279–302. For Sangnier’s embracing of the Popular Front, see Barthélemy-Madaule, *Marc Sangnier*, 271 as well as Paul Christophe, 1936: *Les catholiques et le front populaire* (Paris: Les Éditions Ouvrières, 1986), 25–32. With respect to the diversity of the RUP see Peter Farrugia, “Mésentente Cordiale: Anglo-French Collaboration in the *Rassemblement universel pour la Paix*,” *Synergies RUI* no. 4 (2011): 105–116.

¹¹Fonsegrive, under the pseudonym Yves Le Querdec, wrote a number of novels that provide a wider context for the worker priest movement (see Charles Talar, “The Novelist and Social Catholicism: George Fonsegrive’s *Le Fils de l’Esprit*,” *Journal of Modern and Contemporary Christianity* 1, no. 1 [2022]: 43–60). Bidault was a key figure in efforts to settle a range of issues between the Vatican and the French government at precisely the moment when the worker priests were causing consternation in Rome (see Bernard Berthod and Pierre Blanchard, “Les rapports diplomatiques entre la France et le Saint-Siège Wladimir d’Ormesson et le nonce Paolo Marella, 1953–1957,” *Chrétiens et Sociétés XVIe-XXIe siècles* 6 [1999]: 81–105; <https://doi.org/10.4000/chretienssocietes.6942>).

¹²Wilbert R. Shenk, “Encounters with ‘Culture’ Christianity,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 18, no. 1 (1994): 12.

¹³Shenk, “Encounters with ‘Culture’ Christianity,” 12. See also the useful timeline “Histoire – Mission de France” at <https://missiondefrance.fr/histoire/>.

¹⁴Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 55.

The conclusions reached by Godin and Daniel accorded with Suhard's own convictions. Consequently, he stood by the authors, even though there were elements in the Church that dismissed the findings of *France, pays de mission*? He even took the added step of sending eighty copies of the study to various high-ranking French Catholics to gather their opinions. This helped assure the work's wider success; when it became available to the public, its sales quickly surpassed 80,000 copies and it also provided impetus for the discussions organized in 1943 that produced the Mission de Paris (whose mission field would be the capital and environs) and, later, the worker priest movement.¹⁵

The first cohort of worker priests graduated from the recently established seminary at Lisieux and was sent into working communities in 1946. They were drawn from a variety of backgrounds and experience.¹⁶ Many of the young men later admitted that they had not received a great deal of training on how to penetrate the communities into which they were moving, nor had they developed a detailed plan of action for winning the confidence of those they would encounter. Henri Barreau of the Mission de Paris stated that "There was nothing that was premeditated."¹⁷ Maxime Hua, Director of the Mission, concurred with this assessment, suggesting that strategy evolved organically and was always considered secondary to "the sharing of life" with the workers.¹⁸

Over time, the worker priests did indeed earn the trust of those among whom they lived. A major reason for their success was their immersion in the world of work. They experienced all the things – the incessant noise and "infernal rhythm of the line,"¹⁹ the abuses of management, the low wages, and poor living conditions – that characterized proletarian life. To cite but one example, Henri Perrin, who was part of the team operating in the 13ème arrondissement in Paris, painted a vivid picture of his workplace when he wrote "my factory life has become a slow and progressive revolt against the capitalist world. This began with the inhuman attitude of the manager, who inspects the workers as if they were a roomful of machines."²⁰

In a letter to his sister, Perrin explained a key moment in the work of his team. "In the course of the year," he wrote:

we bought the "Café la Musette," a café and small dance hall, which we have turned into a café-restaurant and meeting hall – the idea being to put this hall. . .at the service of the district and so resolve for ourselves and others, too,

¹⁵Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 56–57. Significantly, Cole-Arnal points out that Godin, Daniel, Suhard, and the theologians present at Lisieux lacked one critical element in that they had not – like some of the young men who would form the vanguard of the worker priest movement – lived the life of the worker and so were not necessarily prepared for the further step of engagement represented by the assuming of leadership in unions (see 60–61).

¹⁶See Suaud and Viet-Depaule, *Prêtres et ouvriers*, 27–53, for detailed biographical notes and charts.

¹⁷Interview with Henri Barreau, December 11–13, 1979. In his notes Oscar Cole-Arnal remarked that Barreau laughed at this question and then added in parenthesis that this was a common response to this query in many interviews.

¹⁸Interview with Maxime Hua, May 9, 1979.

¹⁹I have deliberately chosen this phrase, most often remembered as one of the slogans immortalized in the artwork of May 1968. For an exploration of second-generation worker priests in May 1968, see Gerd Reiner Horn, "Red Priests in Working-Class Blue," in *The Spirit of Vatican II: Western European Progressive Catholicism in the Long Sixties*, eds., Gerd Reiner Horn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 66–67.

²⁰Henri Perrin, *Priest and Worker*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), 110.

the problem of where to hold meetings. . . . All this must surprise you and seem very far from the Kingdom of God. . . . But you must realize that what we are doing is spiritual witness in the sense that it is free of any propaganda, and that we are working in a brotherly spirit with all men, whatever opinions that they hold.²¹

The worker priests were developing a new and deeper relationship with the working class that dictated creative means to demonstrate their solidarity. What they were doing among the marginalized was proving the most effective sermon they could ever deliver.

Theory and praxis were closely linked here. A central tenet of the worker priests was the notion of incarnation. As one team described it in a letter addressed to Achille Cardinal Liénart of Lille, “The incarnational movement of the church must bring all of humanity towards God. When we are rejected for hiring, when our bodies are broken by fatigue, we are with Christ who could have been a prince or doctor, but who chose the working life for thirty years, and who continued to be humiliated, exploited and suffer in the flesh.”²² Life in the factory was an essential element of the worker priest ministry.²³ And the emphasis on suffering was not mere hyperbole. The worker priests had their martyrs, most notably Michel Favreau, killed while unloading the ship *Mary Stone*, after less than a year on the docks of Bordeaux.²⁴

The commitment to manual labor involved a complete re-conceptualization of the value of work. In undertaking this, the worker priests embraced the theology of Aquinas as carefully articulated by the Dominican theologian, Marie-Dominique Chenu at the time. Work, he maintained “is valued as human operation on matter, in contrast to the traditional separation of soul and body, spirit and matter.”²⁵ In this conception, work was not a consequence of the Fall but a symbol of our being made in God’s image, and those who worked with their hands could more easily be identified with the Creator God.²⁶ This approach necessarily problematized the Catholic Church’s acceptance of the sacred/secular and physical/spiritual dualities.²⁷

²¹Perrin, *Priest and Worker*, 121.

²²Typed report by Cardinal Liénart (emphasis added). Cited in Dominique Fontaine, “En Jésus Christ: Un Dieu libérateur dans l’histoire des prêtres ouvriers” (Mémoire de maîtrise: Institut Catholique de Paris, 1981), 5.

²³François Vidal, who worked in the Marseille region, believed factory labor was “the decisive step” in their apostolate. Henri Perrin saw the entry into the factory as “a necessary condition for reform and progress” as well as a needed bulwark against clericalism and “caste mentality” (see Interview with François Vidal, June 2, 1983 and Henri Perrin, *Itinéraire d’Henri Perrin* [Paris: Seuil, 1958], 143–144, both cited in Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 76).

²⁴See “Michel Favreau” in Archives Nationales du Monde du Travail (hereafter ANMT), 1993, 002/002, “Fonds Bob Lathouraz.” As John Petrie notes, the biography of Favreau written by a fellow worker priest was only approved for publication *after* deletion of all reference to the negligence of the employer in maintaining vital equipment (see Petrie, *The Worker Priests*, 20).

²⁵Fontaine, “En Jésus Christ,” 29–30.

²⁶Fontaine, “En Jésus Christ,” 30. See Genesis Chapter 3 for the Biblical account of the origins of work. For more on how the worker priests influenced perception of the dignity of work, see Michèle Bonnechère, “La contribution des prêtres-ouvriers à la lutte pour la dignité dans le travail,” *Le Droit Ouvrier* no. 826 (May 2017): 273–289.

²⁷For an excellent account of how the *nouvelle théologie* of Chenu and others problematized the sacred/secular divide and allowed a space for committed believers to speak on public issues such as capitalism and democracy, see Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth Century French Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2021).

At the same time, the worker priests felt that, in working and living side-by-side with the workers, they were collaborating with the most vital emerging force in French society. As Jean Olhagary of the Mission de Paris puts it, “After the Liberation, those forces and organizations that had taken risks found themselves at the forefront of the stage. It was a triumphant working class that now appeared.”²⁸ This is what made possible the collaboration between Communists, socialists, and Catholics that marked the early years of the Fourth Republic.

The other foundational principle of the worker priests’ apostolate was an emphasis on community of destiny (*communauté de destin*). Within a year of being sent into the field, two worker priests could write to Father Jacques Hollande, head of the Mission de Paris, indicating that the movement should make factory work a mandatory element of their apostolate so as to build that community of outlook that was essential to their ministry.²⁹ This attachment to the notion of community of destiny spurred them on and empowered them “at the outset [to] disarm suspicions and give proof of the their sincerity.”³⁰ Part of the process of sharing the destiny of those to whom they had been sent was the worker priests’ decision to actively participate in the labor movement, first as regular members of unions and then, in some cases, as leaders.³¹ This step was not taken lightly and, as Henri Barreau noted, it was always the team that made the all-important decision to engage – after due prayer and discussion.³² Significantly, when worker priests became involved in union activities, it was not under the auspices of the Catholic inspired *Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens* (CFTC) but of the larger, Communist influenced *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT). This was the more trusted union among workers, and the decision to join its ranks would be among the most momentous the worker priests would make.

It was not long before their decision necessitated hard choices. In 1947, a wave of strikes swept France and had a transformative effect on French politics.³³ The decision to stand with the working class was not simply a strategy to win the admiration of their peers on the part of the worker priests. As they themselves subsequently noted, “The working man’s life is not normally *chosen* as a way of life: the worker himself tends to wish to leave it.”³⁴ The choice of the worker priests was more a reflection of the influence of mentors like Marie-Dominique Chenu. As one observer has underlined, Chenu was a staunch believer in the “conciliar notion of a church that reads and responds to the ‘signs of the times.’”³⁵ In addition to valuing history and to seeking solutions to the

²⁸Jean Olhagary, *Ce mur il faut l’abattre* (Biarritz: Atlantica, 1999), 79.

²⁹“La Responsable du Groupe (note, 1946).” Cited in Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 76.

³⁰Guillaume Cuchet, “Nouvelles perspectives historiographiques sur les prêtres ouvriers (1943–1954),” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire* 3, no. 87 (2005): 182.

³¹Michel Lemonon, Maurice Combe, Robert Pacalet, Jean Gray, Yves Garnier, and André Chauvneau were among those who served as delegates while Jo Lafontaine, Francis Vico, Jo Gouttebarger, and Henri Barreau assumed more senior positions with Barreau eventually rising to become the secretary of the CGT’s largest and most militant metallurgical federation (see Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 87).

³²Interview with Henri Barreau, December 11–13, 1979.

³³See Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, “The Turning Point of French Politics,” *Review of Politics* 13 (January 1, 1951): 302. Duroselle emphasizes the importance of the May 4 strike action at the Renault factory in Boulogne-Billancourt.

³⁴This is a quote from the worker priests’ Green Book October 5, 1953, cited in Poulain and Poulat, *Les prêtres-ouvriers*, 236.

³⁵Mary Kate Holman, “‘Like Yeast in Dough’: The Church–World Relationship in the Evolving Thought of Marie-Dominique Chenu,” *Theological Studies* 81, no. 4 (2020): 789.

most complex issues of the day, Chenu, like Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac, sought to revalorize the theological works of the church fathers. Paradoxically, they felt that it was in returning to the earliest sources of their faith that the Church could best respond to contemporary challenges such as Marxism and existentialism.³⁶

Typical of the worker priests in his assessment of Chenu's influence was Bernard Chauveau, of the Mission de Paris, who claimed "Father Chenu was the one who was often, very, very often, at our meetings before 1954. He was condemned when we were. He placed himself in an attitude of listening. He never played the role of professor."³⁷ For his part, Chenu was thrilled to be involved in what he saw as a fundamental shift in French Catholicism. For him, the worker priests represented a new "theology of mission. . . . The nature, the dynamism, the line of development of the notion of priest. . . was changing at that time. To explain, this was not on the theological level in the abstract but rather by concrete experience." He affectionately referred to this process as an "apostolic contagion."³⁸ The influence of Chenu and others notwithstanding, the young clerics had their detractors. It has been suggested that, even within the movement, "the primacy of the political and ideological produced heavy fracture lines," while for those not directly involved in the work, the temptation to agree with Chenu's diagnosis – minus the qualifier "apostolic" – would have been strong.³⁹

III. The Road to Condemnation, 1949–1954

The year 1949 marked a turning point in the worker priest movement in France. One major factor was the loss of its strongest supporter, Cardinal Suhard. He died in the night of May 30, 1949. Jean Vinatier has written of a couple, "seated on a kitchen bench. . . sixty years of labour, thirty-three years in the same dark room of a leprous hotel. They were taking turns using their sole pair of glasses to read, or rather spell out, an article from the evening paper. And they were both crying. They who had not gone to church since their first communion, they repeated without ceasing to those entering the kitchen: 'You know, Father Suhard is dead.'"⁴⁰ The blow was just as severe for the worker priests. Among the young clergy, Suhard was universally held in high regard for having realized that the church needed to act decisively in order to reach the masses.⁴¹

With or without an influential protector, signs for concern were mounting. On July 1, 1949, the Vatican reminded the faithful of "the impossibility of any collaboration between Catholics and Communists."⁴² This first shot across the bow of the worker priests did not deter them in any way, however. Consequently, in 1951 the French episcopate responded with a *directoire*, a document containing specific instructions

³⁶Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World*, 221–222.

³⁷Interview with Bernard Chauveau, May 11, 1979.

³⁸Interview with Marie-Dominique Chenu, May 15, 1979.

³⁹Tangi Cavalin, "Partir sans esprit de retour: les missionnaires au travail, d'utopie missionnaire en hétérotopie ouvrière," *Cahiers d'histoire. Revue d'histoire critique* 133 (2016): 75. One significant rupture was with Jacques Loew, who rejected the idea that union and political activism "were primordial." (Interview with Jacques Loew, September 9–24, 1980). See also André Piet, "La méthode sacerdotale des prêtres ouvriers" in François Vidal Dossier, Oscar Cole Arnal Papers [hereafter OCA].

⁴⁰*Temoignage chrétien*, 3 juin 1949, cited in Jean Vinatier, *Le Cardinal Suhard (1874–1949) L'évêque du renouveau missionnaire en France* (Paris: Éditions du Centurion, 1983), 429.

⁴¹Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 109–110.

⁴²Cavalin, "Partir sans esprit de retour," 75.

designed to rein in the young priests. It stressed that they should be submissive to their bishops, underlined that they had been sent to evangelize the proletariat and not to “direct its terrestrial effort of liberation” and insisted on the continued distinction between priests and laity.⁴³ As the episcopate feared, the reaction from the worker priests was negative, especially when Mgr. Ancel of Lyon followed up with a lengthy document that was a recapitulation of many of the arguments made in the *directoire*.⁴⁴

As the situation evolved, another issue proved increasingly unsettling for leaders of the Catholic Church in France. A certain tone was creeping into communications between worker priests and their ecclesiastical overseers that was less than deferential. In a letter to his bishop, Bernard Chauveau revealed that he recognized the issue, stating:

As a result of your Ministry, you are automatically ten times better informed than the whispering “gossips” or the scandals raised against us, than the protestations or misunderstandings of the middle class milieu. . . . And while you yourself are bathed in the atmosphere created by their psychology or their reactions, we are, for our part. . . . submerged in the immense human suffering, the scandal of the neglect of the poor. . . . *That will explain our language which is often violent and perhaps unilateral, which can appear to exacerbate an attitude that is less obedient than that of other priests.*⁴⁵

The young priests themselves knew that, as the debate surrounding their work intensified, an attitude of deference to authority was growing harder to maintain.

By 1952 episcopal concern regarding the worker priests had reached new heights. One episode that hardened attitudes vis-à-vis the movement – both in France and in the Vatican – was the mass demonstration against the arrival of American General Matthew Ridgway in France to assume command of NATO forces, and the subsequent revelation that two worker priests had participated in the protest. In recent years, significant opposition to the role of the United States in the Cold War had arisen. The worker priests were largely – though by no means unanimously – supportive of the recently created *Mouvement de la Paix*, knowing full well that this peace movement had been launched by the Communists.⁴⁶

The demonstration on May 28 drew a strong show of force by the police, which prompted criticism in some quarters. This only grew more vociferous when it was learned that two worker priests, Louis Bouyer and Bernard Cagne, vicars at Sacré-Coeur de Petites Colombes, had been arrested and treated roughly by the

⁴³ As Dominique Fontaine points out, the worker priests rejected this distinction between temporal and spiritual salvation because “it is *within* this process of ‘purely human liberation’ that the liberation brought by Jesus Christ must be realized” (Fontaine, “En Jésus Christ,” 59 [emphasis added]).

⁴⁴ “Project de Directoire pour les prêtres travaillant en usine” (1951) in Archives de la Mission de Paris [hereafter MDP] cited in Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 141. A measure of the negativity elicited by these two documents is provided by marginalia on a copy of the draft of the *directoire*. An anonymous commentator wrote “Ancel = Napoleon” at the top of the page (see ANMT, 1993, 002/002).

⁴⁵ “Letter from Bernard Chauveau, n.d.” ANMT, 1993, 002/002 (emphasis added).

⁴⁶ Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 90. Jacques Loew was more cautious in his attitude to this organization. He believed that many of the worker priests had an insufficient grasp of economic realities to be able to resist Communist blandishments and he held that fundamental structural change was not the responsibility of clergy but of lay people (Interview with Jacques Loew, September 9–24, 1980).

authorities.⁴⁷ Bouyer and Cagne were by no means apologetic about their actions and were determined to chronicle what they saw as mistreatment by the police. It was captured in this exchange recounted by the priests:

- Officer: You're a Priest! I'm a former seminarian, a Christian. You, you're a partisan of violence rather than fraternity. [Then he struck the priest with a placard holder].
- Cagne: I have never preached violence. But I understand my comrades when there is provocation.
- Officer: You haven't had enough, bastard, red priest. Your pope is at Moscow. Why don't you go see him? [Then he truncheoned Father Cagne a number of times]. I respect the priest but not the man.
- Cagne: It is the man that you must respect.⁴⁸

The impact of the demonstration, and the two worker priests' part in it, was immediate. Maurice Cardinal Feltin, Suhard's successor in Paris, became entangled in a public dispute with the Chief of Police, Jean Baylot, over whether the authorities had been over-zealous in their response. He issued a communique in which he regretted that "some worker priests had participated in a demonstration of this type" but also declared that he "could not accept that men, whatever type they might be, could suffer treatment unworthy of human beings after their arrest."⁴⁹

Meanwhile, at the grassroots level, there was substantial support for what Bouyer and Cagne had done. One letter, from "a worker from Dijon" began "Thank you on behalf of many friends with whom I have worked for a year. Thank you on behalf of the worker homes which, in reading *Monde Ouvrier*, felt that they were no longer alone in the struggle." Another, from "a working woman" said "We are with you with our whole hearts and we hope that all of this will serve to preserve peace."⁵⁰

An equally disturbing affair from the point of view of both the French episcopate and Rome arose between the worker priests and Gaston Tessier, head of the CFTC, in 1953. Two separate incidents prompted the controversy. In February, discord was sparked when the CFTC raised questions about the legitimacy of Father René Desgrand's role as a leader in the CGT. Eventually, Desgrand, who was based in Lyon, was dismissed. The CFTC responded by remarking that "We believe that it is impossible for these priests to be involved actively as directors or partisans in trade union or political movements." Worker priests in the region defended their comrade angrily, suggesting that the CFTC's pro-capitalist position was by no means "the Christian one."⁵¹

⁴⁷The ministry at Sacré-Coeur was an important precursor of the worker priest movement, launched by Fils de Charité, Georges Michonneau. In 1946, Michonneau's *Paroisse, communauté missionnaire* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1945) suggested that it was not necessary to divorce work among the laboring class from the parish (see Pierre Pierrard, *L'Église et les ouvriers en France, 1940–1990* [Paris: Hachette, 1991], 175).

⁴⁸Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 92–93.

⁴⁹"Communiqué de l'Archévêque de Paris" cited in Marie-Claude Badiche, Maurice Badiche, and Martine Sevegrand, *Des Prêtres-ouvriers insoumis en 1954: Le "Groupe Chauveau" 1957–2011* (Paris: Karthala, 2015), 46.

⁵⁰"Letters of support," ANMT B, 1997, 038/0063, "Manifestation du 5 mai 1952." Many of the dozen or so letters included in this dossier began "I am only a. . ." before expressing solidarity with the worker priests.

⁵¹Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 148.

About the same time, worker priests in Limoges responded with outrage when the confessional union reacted to a strike by counseling members to return to work. The worker priests concluded that the CFTC had, in doing so, “betrayed the immediate interests of the working class.” By August, their Parisian comrades had joined the fray. Unanimously, they criticized the CFTC’s negative impact on the action undertaken by workers when it negotiated a separate agreement with authorities. They characterized this move as “an unconditional capitulation. . . of the vital interests of the workers in struggle.”⁵²

These two disagreements prompted Tessier to act. He was especially vexed by the fact that the public statement of the worker priests in August had been published in *L’Humanité*. Consequently, he brought a defamation case against eighteen worker priests before the archdiocesan tribunal. On behalf of their colleagues, Henri Barreau and Jean-Claude Poulain drafted a document defending their actions.⁵³ Its contents are enlightening. The document begins with excerpts from the article in *L’Humanité*, notably a section declaring that, by their actions, “CFTC unions became the accomplices of the government, the bosses and the most privileged” rather than the protectors of the laboring class.⁵⁴

The authors of the worker priest brief stated that the key points to be determined in the case were: (1) whether the declaration that appeared in *L’Humanité* had any basis in fact; (2) whether it contained a true defamation of character; and (3) whether the claimant was entitled to damages as a result of the declaration.⁵⁵ On this last question, the defendants made an important distinction. They contended that their charge of dishonesty related exclusively to the policies that Tessier had encouraged in his capacity as head of the confessional union.⁵⁶ The archdiocesan court eventually rendered its verdict – in favor of Tessier – on March 24, 1954. However, by this point, the outcome was moot. Even before the verdict had been released, it had become increasingly clear that the worker priests would face some sort of censure from the Church hierarchy.⁵⁷

A major step in the process that was unfolding came on November 4, 1953, when Mgrs. Feltin, Liénart, and Gerlier (of Paris, Lille, and Lyon, respectively) traveled to Rome to discuss the worker priest movement with the pope. Their hopes for the meeting are revealed in exchanges circulated to the Assemblée des Cardinaux et Archevêques. A report prepared by Mgr. Ancel (Liénart’s lieutenant) laid out the thinking of the French episcopate. It began by noting the pope’s concern for the priestly life of the

⁵²“Notre action – le cas Desgrand,” Section syndicale CFTC (1953), 1–2 in MDP (1953); see also “La Trahison des dirigeants de FO et de la CFTC,” *France Nouvelle* September 5, 1953, 5; and “Déclaration de Travailleurs Chrétiens sur les grèves d’Aout 1953,” 1–4 in MDP.

⁵³Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 148.

⁵⁴*L’Humanité* April 3, 1953, 5. Cited in “Cause Tessier Barreau,” April 24, 1953, in OCA, Dossier Barreau.

⁵⁵“Cause Tessier Barreau,” 11–12.

⁵⁶“Cause Tessier Barreau,” 19–20.

⁵⁷This feeling went beyond France. *Time* magazine noted that “to many a watchful prelate it has looked as though the worker-priests were more converts than converters. Two of them were arrested in last year’s Communist-inspired riots against General Ridgway. . . [and] others burst into print from time to time with letters to the Communist press criticizing Catholic labor-union policies as not militant enough.” The piece also recalled Cardinal Pizzardo’s statement that the movement had had “a negative influence in the formation of young priests” which rendered it very dangerous (see “Religion: No More Prêtres-Ouvriers?” *Time*, Monday, September 28, 1953; available at <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,818923,00.html>).

worker priests and added the hierarchy's conviction that "Had the Cardinals not travelled to Rome, the institution of the worker priests would have been suppressed, pure and simple."⁵⁸ The document noted that "The worker priests speak of how they have found, in their mode of living, a priestly life that does not recognize the same functions as the life of other priests" and then addressed the issue of factory work, emphasizing that half-time labor (which had been rumored to be a condition that would be imposed by Rome) would not allow the priests to support themselves. Understandably, the worker priests wanted to avoid at all costs being placed "in a privileged situation" as this would undermine their claim to be sharing in the life of the marginalized.⁵⁹

There was hope that the French delegation to Rome might be able to win some concessions on the modalities of the new regulations for the priests. However, it turned out that there was little flexibility in the Vatican. Pius XII would allow a form of apostolate among the working class to continue but he would insist on certain stipulations being strictly applied. Candidates for this ministry would be selected by their bishops only. A much more rigorous period of spiritual formation would be required. The time spent engaged in manual labor would be reduced to three hours per day. The priests would be forbidden to take on any "temporal engagement." Finally, all priests undertaking this ministry would be required to maintain solid ties to other priests as well as the parish.⁶⁰ There could be no doubt: the worker priest experiment, as originally conceived at least, was coming to an end.

Before exploring the repercussions of Rome's decision, it is worthwhile considering for a few moments the wider forces that were at work and which worked against the French worker priests. A close reading of communications between the government of France and the Vatican reveals that, contrary to the orthodox interpretation of events that has emerged, condemnation of the worker priests was not imposed entirely by forces external to France.⁶¹ In fact, the French government had an agenda of its own in play and, if its success required that Rome's concerns regarding the worker priests were addressed, this was a price that the Elysée was willing to pay.

Much has been written about the role played in the censure of the worker priests by the pope. Pius XII has, of course, been a lightning rod for controversy given his actions during World War II.⁶² There is no question that, after initially approving Cardinal Suhard's vision for reaching the proletariat – a fact the Vatican downplayed amidst later controversies – the Pontiff grew alarmed when the worker priests embraced

⁵⁸Albert Ancel, "Réunion des Prêtres-Ouvriers de Lyon, chez son Em. Le Cardinal Gerlier s.d." Centre National des Archives de l'Église de France [hereafter, CNAEF] 7CE4299, "Problèmes posés par les prêtres-ouvriers (1953–1954)," 1.

⁵⁹"Problèmes posés," 2, 3.

⁶⁰Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 149.

⁶¹The idea that the condemnation was imposed from without quickly took root in France. As Berthod and Blanchard have observed, the worker priest affair, which began as a strictly ecclesiastical matter, "did not remain on this level. Very rapidly the intellectual and political realms took interest in it. . . . The political realm saw in it interference by the Holy See in the foreign affairs of France and a pretext to question the laicity of the State" (Berthod and Blanchard, "Les rapports diplomatiques").

⁶²The most scathing assessment of Pius XII's Papacy in John Cornwell's, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (London: Viking, 1999). A more balanced assessment is provided by Frank J. Coppa, *The Life & Pontificate of Pope Pius XII: Between History & Controversy* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 2013). For a tighter focus on the Cold War, see Peter C. Kent, *The Lonely Cold War of Pope Pius XII* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

proletarian causes. Developments in the Cold War, and his own declining health, only exacerbated the pope's native anxiety. The French Ambassador to the Holy See, Vladimir d'Ormesson,⁶³ offered a frank evaluation of Pius XII to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Georges Bidault, in May 1954. He believed France was faced "with a Pope – whose congenital mistrust has been multiplied by the unfortunate polemics that recent events have generated in France" and he added that the Pontiff "is practically cut off from the world and lives more than ever in seclusion."⁶⁴

While d'Ormesson was under no illusions regarding the attitudes of the pope, his exchanges with his superiors in Paris also reveal that a third player in the drama of the worker priests' condemnation has not necessarily received the attention it deserves. That third player is the French government itself. It has only recently come to light that, from as early as March 1952, secret negotiations had been under way between Rome and successive regimes. One observer has gone so far as to suggest that "The Government, and more precisely the MRP and Georges Bidault, hope to obtain a type of concordat in order to ameliorate relations between the Church and France, and above all to resolve questions that are poisoning domestic politics, especially the question of private schools." Robert Lecourt,⁶⁵ an MRP deputy and Justice Minister in three coalitions in the late 1940s, was entrusted with making the approach to the Holy See, and talks continued under successive ministries, the last being the government of SFIO leader Guy Mollet (1956–1957).⁶⁶

The continued reports from the French Ambassador in Rome paint a fascinating picture of a political class that was not necessarily opposed to a definitive solution to the worker priest problem. As early as April 1953, d'Ormesson expressed concern that the government of Radical René Mayer (January 8 to June 28, 1953) was not moving sufficiently quickly on this file. In one report, he pointed out that "If we lose time in sorting out certain problems in France, do we not risk seeing a situation arise here that is

⁶³Count Wladimir d'Ormesson was a French aristocrat with moderately right-wing leanings, who served as the French Ambassador to the Vatican during the Vichy regime and then again from 1948 to 1956. For a good account of the challenges faced by d'Ormesson and his perceptive observations of the key players in Rome, see Sophie Gauthier, "Au Plaisir de Dieu, Au Service de L'état: L'ambassade près le Saint-Siège de Wladimir d'Ormesson au prisme de son journal, 1948–1956" (thèse doctorale, École des Chartes, 2018); available at <https://www.chartes.psl.eu/fr/positions-theses/ambassade-pres-saint-siege-wladimir-ormesson-au-prisme-son-journal-1948-1956>.

⁶⁴"Rome le 13 mai 1954 note confidentielle," 10–11 and 4, in Archives Georges Bidault, Archives Nationales [hereafter AN] 457AP/103. The Pontiff's state of mind was all the more relevant given the fact that, since the death of Mgr. Luigi Malione in 1944, there had been no Secretary of State (see Jean-Dominique Durand, "Un diplomate sans secrétaire d'État: le journal de Wladimir d'Ormesson, ambassadeur de France près le Saint-Siège (1948–1956)," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome, Italie et Méditerranée* 110, no. 2 [1998]: 629–630).

⁶⁵Lecourt was "held in high regard by the Ambassador but also by Mgr. Domenico Tardini, the pro-Secretary of State." Lecourt's "permanence at the centre of conversations, until 1957, demonstrated his skills, his human qualities and his respect for the opinions of other political organizations" (see Berthod and Blanchard, "Les rapports diplomatiques"). The other two "friends in Paris of whom d'Ormesson spoke were CFTC executive Alfred Michelin and a Mgr. Marguerite," who was eventually unmasked as Mgr. Jean Villot, the Auxiliary Bishop of Paris at the time (see Antoine Wenger, *Le cardinal Villot, 1905–1979* [Paris: Desclée de Brouwer], 1989).

⁶⁶Berthod and Blanchard, "Les rapports diplomatiques." For a useful account of the negotiations in their entirety, see Robert Lecourt, *Entre l'Église et l'État, concorde sans Concordat (1952–1957)* (Paris: Hachette, 1978).

similar to the situation that exists in Italy?”⁶⁷ The Government was keen to avert the emergence of a united Left, which would pose serious problems for the ruling coalition.

Communications from d’Ormesson in Rome make it clear that the fate of the worker priests was linked to a number of matters that the French government was keen to settle with the Vatican. On April 8, 1953, the Ambassador remarked that his contacts in Rome “were actually motivated by the necessity of arriving at an arrangement of a range of outstanding questions,” including issues surrounding education, a thorny question in the Fourth Republic.⁶⁸ The MRP in particular was especially keen to see a relaxation of the strictures against Catholic education in France and d’Ormesson knew that this would be a tough sell in an environment in which there remained significant domestic support for laicity.⁶⁹

It would appear then that the French government was not simply an innocent bystander as the final drama of the worker priests unfolded. Reasons of state encouraged the MRP to sacrifice the young clerics in the hope of winning significant domestic concessions. But among the worker priests themselves, there was little knowledge of what forces were at play at the governmental level. In their mind, the real betrayal had come from Rome and from the French Church’s hierarchy, especially those who had once supported their efforts. The mortal blow came on January 19, 1954, in the form of a collective letter from all the bishops with worker priests under their charge. The three hour limit on manual labor would not be revised, and clergy were expected to “resign from all temporal responsibilities to which the trust of [their] colleagues may have called [them].” This included simple union membership. A deadline of March 1 was established as the date by which compliance was expected.⁷⁰

In Paris, Cardinal Feltin, faithful to instructions from the Vatican, made attempts to meet one-on-one with individual worker priests. This was resisted by the priests as a tactic to gradually wear the hierarchy down.⁷¹ At Lille, there were initially hopes that Cardinal Liénart’s past support for the movement would soften his line of conduct. However, the worker priests were bitterly disappointed when Liénart proclaimed “To be a priest and to be a worker are two different functions, two different states of life,

⁶⁷“Letter from Vladimir d’Ormesson, April 9, 1953,” 7 in AN 457AP/103.

⁶⁸“Note confidentielle remise le 8 avril 1953 à M. Tardini” in 457AP/103. The Loi Marie and Loi Barangé of 1951 had already “provided respectively credits for the education minister to award to the most deserving pupils attending either state or private secondary schools, with priority for the former, and allocated a special amount at the treasury for parents with children attending state or private school (1,000 old francs per child per term)” (see David L. Hanley, Anne P. Kerr, and Neville H. Waite, eds., *Contemporary France: Politics and Society Since 1945* [Milton Park Oxon.: Taylor & Francis, 1985], 276–277). However, a more comprehensive agreement on educational reform eluded negotiators until the birth of the Fifth Republic in 1958.

⁶⁹For insight into the educational question and how conversations about European cooperation further complicated matters for the MRP, see Marco Duranti, *The Conservative Human Rights Revolution: European Identity, Transnational Politics, and the Origins of the European Convention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), esp. 290–320. For an overview of the vexed question of laicity, see Jean Baubérot, “Laicity,” trans. Arthur Goldhammer in *The French Republic: History, Values, Debates*, eds., Edward G. Berenson, Vincent Duclert, and Christophe Prochasson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 127–135. The evidence provided by these sources directly contradicts Georges Bidault’s own testimony that he had little to do with worker priests (Interview with Georges Bidault, May 18, 1979).

⁷⁰“The Bishops’ Letter to the Worker-Priests,” (January 19, 1954) in Petrie, *The Worker Priests*, 172–175.

⁷¹See Roger Deliat, *Vingt ans O.S. chez Renault* (Paris: Les Éditions ouvrières, 1973), 134–139; Interview with Jean Olhagary, June 13, 1979; Interview with Césaire Dillaye, May 14, 1979; Interview with Henri Barreau, December 11–13, 1979.

and it is not possible to unite them in the same person without altering the notion of the priesthood.”⁷² In Lyon, shock at the turn of events was also, equally strongly felt.

Similar currents were evident in French public opinion more generally. One of the strongest denunciations of the Vatican action came from François Mauriac in an editorial for *Le Figaro* published on February 16, 1954. Mauriac wrote that “an attack on the spiritual sons of Father Lacordaire. . . would be the equivalent of blowing up one of our cathedrals. Here the boundary is ill drawn between the undoubted rights of the Church and the equally undoubted rights of the nation.”⁷³ Ironically, Mauriac called for a Concordat with Rome himself, but not for the reasons that interested the French government. In large measure, his demand came as a result of what he viewed as the Papal Nuncio’s maladroitness handling of the worker priest file.⁷⁴ Interestingly, the timing of Mauriac’s outburst convinced Pius XII that Mauriac had inside knowledge of the negotiations that were taking place between Paris and Rome but this was not the case, as d’Ormesson staunchly maintained.⁷⁵

When the worker priests responded to the French episcopate, they also spoke collectively, rejecting Rome’s edict. “At a moment,” they declared:

when millions of workers in France, as well as abroad, are on the march towards unity to defend their bread, their liberty and Peace, and Management and Government are heightening exploitation and repression to erase at any price the progress of the working class and the preservation of their rights, the religious authorities are imposing on the worker priests conditions that constitute an abandonment of their life as workers and a renunciation of the struggle that they are undertaking in solidarity with all comrades.⁷⁶

If forced to choose between filial submission to the Church hierarchy and their bonds with the French working class, it appeared that they would choose the latter.

The press, as always, was split as to whether the right course had been taken regarding the worker priests. However, there were significant shows of support for the embattled clergy, in addition to Mauriac’s incendiary editorial. For example, on February 8, 1954, the director of French language programming for Vatican Radio declared “We sympathise with you, we suffer with you, and we feel the need to tell you how much we admire both what you have been and what you have done. In general, your worker comrades have made no mistake about you. But outsiders have been wrong, all too

⁷²“La Déclaration du Cardinal Liénart,” *Semaine Religieuse de Lille* (January 10, 1954) cited in Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 150. As it turned out, Liénart did not entirely disappoint. For example, he allowed Bernard Tiberghien to continue working at the docks of Lille, reasoning “quite loyally, I can make this fit, as it corresponds to the formula of three hours per day: $6 \times 3 = 18$. You will no doubt rarely work more than 18 hours per week. Thus, I allow you to go there. It is part-time work” (see René Poterie and Louis Jeusselin, *Prêtres-ouvriers. 50 ans d’histoire et de combats* [Paris: Harmattan, 2001], 133).

⁷³*Le Figaro*, February 16, 1954, cited in Petrie, *The Worker Priests*, 45.

⁷⁴“Rome, 6 mars 1954 note confidentielle,” 2 in AN457AP/103. As one observer has put it, Mauriac “no longer held the same sway with the Christian Democrat leaders of the MRP – Maurice Schumann, Georges Bidault or Pierre-Henri Teitgen – in whom he had placed all his hopes in 1944 for the renovation of French democracy” (“François Mauriac” in *Le Dictionnaire biographique Maitron*; available at <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article141424>).

⁷⁵“Note confidentielle de WO le 6 mars 1954,” AN457AP/103.

⁷⁶This is the famous declaration of the 73 (cited in Nathalie Viet-Depaule et al., *La Mission de Paris: Cinq prêtres-ouvriers insoumis témoignent* [Paris: Karthala, 2002], Annexe 8, 313–314).

often.”⁷⁷ Reaction was not confined to France either. Around the world, those who had seen in the worker priests a beacon of Catholic progressivism were disheartened by the Vatican’s decision. The American activist, Dorothy Day, lauded the worker priests who “have been doing what Jesus Christ Himself told them to do in their great love of God and of their brothers” and remarked that criticism of the firebrands “comes from the rich and powerful, whose greed and wealth” rendered them sensitive any criticism.⁷⁸ The outcry against the censure of the worker priests was loud and consistent among those who had hoped that Cardinal Suhard’s wall between the Church and the *menu peuple* could be torn down.

Negative reactions to the condemnation arose beyond the realms of politics and social activism; theological opposition also emerged. In September 1953, Yves Congar, fretting over the mounting signs of opposition to the worker priests among the Church’s hierarchy had written “It is clear that the Hierarchy, in sending them out, had not foreseen all the consequences of their engagement.”⁷⁹ The authorities had lost sight of the deep roots of concern for the marginalized evident, not just in the Gospels, but also in the writings of the church fathers.

IV. The Historiography of the Worker Priests

In the final analysis, the combination of a misreading of the repercussions of their apostolate, the wider forces operative in Cold War Europe and a convergence of interest between a conservative Vatican and a French government seeking regulation of important questions with Rome, led to the demise of the worker priest movement. But the disappearance of the worker priests did not necessarily lead to a calming of the waters.⁸⁰ The battle over the depiction of these young men – the *historiographical* conflict – remained long after 1954.

Even before the first wave of worker priests was censured by Rome, their story elicited varying responses. Initially, it was largely journalists who shaped the narrative. There were some who saw the worker priests as, at best, dupes of a cunning Communist plan and, at worst, priests in name only. However, particularly in the early days of their ministry, support for their missionary effort was widespread. As *La Croix* editorialized at the end of 1946, “we must have the courage to run some risks, if we are to avoid loading our consciences with not having done everything possible for the salvation of the world.”⁸¹ Three years later, in the wake of an *Osservatore Romano* article that claimed “A good Catholic does not go over to the enemy camp,

⁷⁷Cited in Petrie, *The Worker Priests*, 44.

⁷⁸Dorothy Day, “French Worker Priests and the Little Brothers of de Foucauld,” *The Catholic Worker*, March 1954, 2, 4.

⁷⁹Yves Congar, “L’Avenir des Prêtres Ouvriers,” *Témoignage Chrétien* September 25, 1953, 1. Congar’s concern was reflected in the thoughts of the worker priests themselves. One document written after the condemnation of 1954 spoke of how the Church had simultaneously made them Christians *and* bourgeois in thought and habit. The authors asked “Might there be in our spirit some unconscious but unavoidable consequences, given our past immersion in bourgeois ideology?” (ANMT, 1993, 002/0005).

⁸⁰Their absence was short lived. In 1965, following Vatican II, *prêtres au travail* (as opposed to *prêtres ouvriers*) were permitted once more. Interestingly, some of the theologians who had been influential among the worker priests played significant roles in the work of the Council, most notably Yves Congar. Chenu, after multiple run-ins with authorities, was relegated to a minor role, serving as an advisor to the bishops of Madagascar (see Janette Gray, “Congar and Chenu: Inside and Outside Vatican II,” in *Congar and Chenu: Friend, Teacher, Brother* [Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Theology, 2017], 16).

⁸¹*La Croix*, December 8, 1946. Cited in Petrie, *The Worker Priests*, 13.

deluded that he will be more effective there,” *La Croix* countered that Cardinal Suhard was rightly being lauded for his foresight in launching the mission of the worker priests, stating that “the enterprise is a daring one, at least as daring as that of the first Christians among the heathens.”⁸²

By the 1950s, works of fiction were contributing to the public image of the worker priests. In 1952 alone, Gilbert Cesbron’s *Les Saints vont en enfer*, Jean Anglade’s *Chien du Seigneur*, and *Léon Morin prêtre* by Beatrix Beck all appeared (the last of these winning the Prix Goncourt). The following year *Cet homme qui vous aimait* by Roger Besus was published. These works “promote the prophetic figure of the priest of the *banlieue*, at the forefront of the Church.”⁸³ It bears underlining that the novels, though fiction, possessed a significant documentary element as well. As Cesbron himself wrote in the preface to *Les Saints vont en enfer*: “You would search in vain for [the town of] Sagny on a map; however, what I am recounting, you will see in almost every Parisian *banlieue*. . . on condition that you possess a pure eye and heart exempt from bias.”⁸⁴

These various works of journalism and fiction lauding the worker priests were not objective. They portrayed a cohort of young priests whose work necessitated as much the overcoming of obstacles placed in their way by the Church as it did the overcoming of class suspicions among workers. That Cesbron was perhaps not the impartial observer he claimed to be was suggested in 1953. He wrote an impassioned article concluding with an invocation of the fallen priest, Michel Favreau: “Michel Favreau, pray for the Cardinals and for the seminarians who keep quiet and obey, pray for the Christians whose hearts narrow at this moment and for the partisan men who rejoice at what is happening and for the militant workers chased from the factories.”⁸⁵ More works taking the young priests as their subject would appear in the years to come. It has been calculated that, between 1943 and 1963, twelve novels and four plays were written in which the movement featured, and many of these were translated into multiple languages. Alain Jansen’s *Il n’y aura qu’un visage* went so far as to depict a situation strikingly similar to what unfolded in 1954.⁸⁶

In an article in *France Observateur*, Maurice Nadeau attempted to understand the breadth and depth of popular interest in the worker priests. He wrote “Perhaps, beyond political and confessional issues, something else takes hold of us in this case of men who gradually lost their ‘sacred’ character and appeared obedient to the call of responsibility. We judge them, choosing sides for or against them based on interests that are no longer heavenly but are terrestrial.”⁸⁷ It is important to note that it was not only in the realm of fiction that the worker priests held sway. In the twenty-year span mentioned above, some seventy-eight works appeared, including twelve biographies, thirteen memoirs, eleven contemplative works, and seventeen historical works (mostly of a partisan

⁸²*L’Osservatore Romano*, March 5, 1949 and *La Croix*, March 31, 1949. Both cited in Petrie, *The Worker Priests*, 15.

⁸³Frédéric Gugelot, “Le Christ et ses apôtres en banlieue parisienne Les romans sacerdotaux témoins des expériences catholiques des années 1950,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 165 (janvier–mars 2014), 84.

⁸⁴Gilbert Cesbron, *Les saints vont en enfer* (Paris: Le livre de poche, 1955), 7.

⁸⁵“Eglise et problèmes sociaux dans la France aujourd’hui” (trans. Duilio Morisini, “Dal Sacerdote Docker al sacerdote metallurgico.” *Paese Sera* November 12, 1953, 2 in ANMT B, 1997, 038/0064, “Lettres des PO à Mgr. Feltrin.”

⁸⁶Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 167.

⁸⁷Maurice Nadeau, “Un Prêtre Devient Ouvrier,” *France Observateur*, 16 mai 1954.

nature). Once again, many were translated into foreign languages and the collection of documents, *Les Prêtres Ouvriers*, sold some 12,000 copies.⁸⁸

It is not enough to simply note the popularity of these works, however. We can see in them the continuation of the debate about the ministry of these young priests. *Les prêtres ouvriers* was the first historical work about the movement, produced in the very year of its censure in 1954. It was followed in 1965, the year of the triumphal return of the concept of priests in the working world, by Emile Poulat's *Naissance des prêtres ouvriers*.⁸⁹ Both of these works attempted to build a case for the assertion that the worker priests had been misunderstood.

By the 1980s, there was a revival of interest in the worker priest movement. Dominique Leprieur's *Quand Rome condamne* focused, not so much on the fate of the worker priests specifically as on the "purge" undertaken against various progressive forces active in French Catholicism.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, Oscar Cole-Arnal's *Priests in Working Class Blue* covered the entire arc of the first wave of worker priests. Intriguingly, it was also among the first works to suggest a link between the liberation theology that emerged in Latin America beginning in the late 1960s and the worker priests of the 1940s and 1950s.⁹¹ It is worth dwelling for a moment on the contemporary circumstances in which these parallels were noted.

At the time that *Priests in Working Class Blue* was published, liberation theology was very much in the news. It is generally thought to have first been articulated at the Latin American Bishops' Conference of 1968 held in Medellín, Colombia. The opening paragraphs of the document produced emphasized that "The Latin American bishops cannot remain indifferent in the face of the tremendous social injustices existent in Latin America, which keep the majority of our peoples in dismal poverty. . . . A deafening cry pours from the throats of millions of men, asking their pastors for a liberation that reaches them from nowhere else."⁹²

As important as this declaration was, the central text in the rise of liberation theology was the 1973 work, *A Theology of Liberation*, by Peruvian Dominican philosopher and priest, Gustavo Gutiérrez. Speaking on the story of the Good Samaritan in the Bible (Matthew 10:29–36) Gutiérrez reminded his readers that "The neighbor. . . is not the one whom I find in my path, but rather the one in whose path I place myself, the one whom I approach and actively seek."⁹³ Gutiérrez went on to decry the manner in which the figure of Jesus Christ had been sanitized by some, insisting that "we take it for granted that Jesus was not interested in political life: his mission was purely religious. . . . The life of Jesus is thus placed outside history, unrelated to the real forces at play."⁹⁴ In order to respect those "real forces" Gutiérrez advocated for an approach that did not simply go to the poor with preconceived notions of their needs and the best

⁸⁸Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 167.

⁸⁹Cuchet, "Nouvelles perspectives historiographiques," 177.

⁹⁰Cuchet, "Nouvelles perspectives historiographiques," 177.

⁹¹One interesting exploration of this link is Michael Löwy and Jesús García-Ruiz, "Les sources françaises de la libération au Brésil/The French Sources of Liberation Christianity in Brazil," *Archives des sciences sociales des religions* no. 97 (1997): 9–32.

⁹²"The Medellín Statement, 1968" cited in John W. Murphy and Karen A. Callaghan, eds., *Toward a Post-Market Society* (New York: Nova Science, 2011), 152–153.

⁹³Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (New York: Orbis, 1973), 113 (emphasis added).

⁹⁴Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 225–226.

forms of action, but that sought the input of the marginalized in *all* phases of the effort to overcome injustice.

Cole-Arnal's study of the worker priests was published with the arrival of conservative Republican, Ronald Reagan, in the White House. The United States was carefully monitoring events in Latin America, where progressive clergy were drawing on the insights of liberation theology to combat the oligarchies that controlled their countries and seemed indifferent to the suffering of the population. The Vatican, too, was watching the region with concern, so much so that in August 1984 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI) issued an "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation.'" He claimed that his purpose was "to draw the attention of pastors, theologians and all the faithful to the deviations and risks of deviation, damaging to the faith and to Christian living, that are brought about by certain forms of liberation theology which use, in an insufficiently critical manner, concepts borrowed from various currents of Marxist thought."⁹⁵ The Latin American Church was being taken to task in language that was very similar to the language used to rein in the French worker priests at the height of the Cold War.⁹⁶

In the last quarter century, there has been another wave of interest in the worker priest movement. Nathalie Viet-Depaule, arguably the most accomplished and influential of those who have devoted their time to this movement, has explained this reigniting of interest. "It is a matter," she insisted "of preserving the memory of the worker priests, a task which the advancing age of the oldest of them lends an urgent character."⁹⁷ Much as was the case with the vanishing *témoins* of the Great War at about the same time, researchers were concerned to record for posterity the experiences of those who had lived through the events being examined. But there was another element that was equally important. It was to ensure that the men did not become mere abstractions, to guarantee that what they lived through – fear, solidarity, anger, betrayal – were not lost to future generations. This determination had two impacts: (1) on the one hand, it ensured that ample space was left for the priests themselves to speak and offer their analysis; (2) it also led to an emphasis on the previously under-appreciated aspects of the worker priest experience, such as the details of daily life, or the friendships and romantic relationships that developed in the course of events.⁹⁸ These works represented nothing less than an attempt to recover the full memory of the worker priests and their ministry.

V. The Impact of the Pioneer Worker Priests

The condemnation of the original worker priests by the Vatican in 1954 represented a painful moment in the history of the Catholic Church and a moment of considerable anguish for the young men who were singled out. It is easy to forget those whose

⁹⁵Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation" (1984); https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html.

⁹⁶Some have seen the connection to liberation theology as tenuous. However, Gerd-Rainer Horn's *Western European Theology, 1924–1959, The First Wave* (New York: Oxford University, 2008) posits a stronger link.

⁹⁷Suaud and Viet-Depaule, *Prêtres et ouvriers*, 16.

⁹⁸For the former, see for example the contributions of Jean-Marie Marzio, Jean Olhagary, and Jean Desailly in *La Mission de Paris*, 21–92, 177–283. For the latter see those of Marie Barreau and of Viet-Depaule and Yvonne Besnard in the same work (93–176).

lives were turned upside down in the struggle to connect with the laboring class. But even a cursory glance at the responses of individual worker priests makes clear the sense of sorrow, frustration, and betrayal that they felt. A draft response to the bishops from February 1954 speaks of “the disavowal of which we are the object, the suspicion that infected our priesthood. Before public opinion, we are accused of having betrayed our engagements and frustrated the world of the workers with what we had the duty to bring to it.”⁹⁹ For his part, Henri Barreau felt that “We could conclude. . .that the Church is by nature of the camp of the oppressor, call into question our faith in Christ son of God. . .and each of us return to his tent to remake his life.”¹⁰⁰ Certainly, at the time of the censure, the Church hierarchy – apart from some of the young men’s strongest supporters – overlooked the depth of the pain that Rome’s edict occasioned. It was in subsequent historiographical forays into the period that this memory was recovered and valorized.

What has been standard practice from the beginning was to divide the first-generation worker priests into two distinct camps: the *soumis*, who loyally accepted the restrictions on their apostolate mandated by Rome, and the *insoumis*, who chose obedience to the working class over obedience to the Church. As more recent scholarship has underlined, however, this simple distinction is not entirely useful. Especially among the *insoumis*, post-1954 trajectories varied. Some, like Henri Barreau and Jean Desailly, moved away from the church, continuing in their roles as activists in the labor movement and choosing to marry. Others, like Bernard Cagne, maintained “a presence that sought to remain loyal, if not to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, then at least to their priesthood as worker priests” with whom he always identified.¹⁰¹

While there can be no doubting the depth of emotion they felt as a result of their censure,¹⁰² the original worker priests could take some solace in the fact that, as a result of the Second Vatican Council (1959–1965), the Catholic Church approved the relaunching of *prêtres au travail* and over the next decade and a half, the movement grew significantly. From a total of fifty-two who took up work once again in 1965, the number in France rose to some 800 by 1976. Still, their prominence was temporary. By 2005, there remained approximately 400, of whom only eighty were still active.¹⁰³ The relaunching of priests whose apostolate included manual labor represented, not simply a vindication of the pioneers, but also a testimony to the depth of feeling that their suppression occasioned among a large number of progressive Catholics, even many who had had difficult relations with the worker priests.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹“Project de Réponse aux Évêques, 15 février 1954,” 1 in ANMT, 1993, 002/002.

¹⁰⁰Henri Barreau, “Situation des Prêtres ouvriers demeures au Travail,” 3 in ANMT, 1993, 002/002. Even after the reopening of the path of manual labor in 1965, the original worker priests still felt their wounds deeply. A survey of those who had elected not to obey Rome’s edict to terminate their manual work and involvement in labor organizations revealed a great deal of pain (see ANMT, 1993, 002/0007, especially the responses of Aldo Bardini, Louis Bouyer, Jean Cottin, Roger Deliat, and Bob Lathuraz).

¹⁰¹Cavalin, “Partir sans esprit de retour,” 77. For details of their lives after 1954, see Jean Desailly, *Prêtre-ouvrier. Mission de Paris, 1946–1954* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), and Bernard Cagne, *Prêtre-ouvrier à La Courneuve. Un insoumis de 1954* (Paris: Karthala, 2007), esp. 177–198.

¹⁰²Emile Poulat perhaps put it best when he claimed that “The worker-priests were sundered in their living flesh. . .assailed at the very root of their religious existence” (see Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 156).

¹⁰³See Christophe Gracieux, “Les prêtres-ouvriers: Contexte historique,” *Lumni Enseignement*; available at <https://enseignants.lumni.fr/fiche-media/00000000837/les-pretres-ouvriers.html>.

¹⁰⁴Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 157–163.

More important than the leavening impact among French Catholics, however, was the wider impact that the worker priest movement had on notions of social justice in industrial settings. It has been suggested that “Behind the specifics of worker-priest ministries, these pioneer clergy represent a paradigm of liberation thought and praxis for the industrial west” and, by implication developing regions of the world also.¹⁰⁵ It is little wonder that, in remembering the heady early days of the movement, Yves Congar remarked: “Anyone who did not live through the years 1946 and 1947 in the history of French Catholicism has missed one of the finest moments in the life of the Church.”¹⁰⁶

VI. Conclusion

St. Francis of Assisi’s assertion that “The deeds you do may be the only sermon some persons will hear today” would have drawn approval from the pioneering worker priests who began their ministry in 1946. Some had already preached effectively through their actions during the Occupation of France in World War II. To a man, they believed that the working class of France had become alienated from the Church and that a truly missionary effort was necessary to promote reconnection. Nourished by the *nouvelle théologie*, which sought an answer to the problem of modernism in a reassessment of the teachings of the church fathers, and protected by the powerful figure of Cardinal Suhard, they chose to live in the same poor conditions as the laboring class and they took up the same tools in the factories in which they toiled. Significantly, they also joined the same unions as their co-workers, in some cases rising to senior positions in these organizations.

The movement that had started with great hope met its demise, however, less than a decade after its inauguration. A combination of factors – including increasingly bold activism on the part of many of the young clerics, the loss of their chief benefactor, Mgr. Suhard, and growing suspicion of French Communism amidst the mounting tensions of the Cold War – rendered the position of the worker priests tenuous. What has sometimes been overlooked in analyses of the movement’s censure, however, was the role played by French political leaders (including members of the MRP) in the final condemnation of the initiative. The single-minded focus of successive ministries on arriving at a settlement of outstanding issues between Paris and Rome, most importantly clarifying the role of Catholic-based education in France, meant that any irritants to the Vatican had to be removed. This sealed the fate of the worker priests, who had been troubling a growing number of the leaders of the Catholic Church for some time.

The worker priest experiment was not decisively terminated in 1954. By 1965 working priests – albeit with more clearly defined roles and tighter controls – were permitted once again as a result of the changes wrought by the Second Vatican Council. While their number has been in decline in France for some considerable time now, it remains striking that, in an era when Catholicism has declined in developed countries yet grown in developing ones, and in which the Pontiff himself both hails from the Global South and embraces the call to love the marginalized, the message preached by the worker

¹⁰⁵Cole-Arnal, *Priests in Working Class Blue*, 173. See also Oscar Cole-Arnal, *To Set the Captives Free: Liberation Theology in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1998), 54–55.

¹⁰⁶Yves Congar, trans. Philip Loretz, *Dialogue between Christians: Catholic Contributions to Ecumenism* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 32.

priests resonates.¹⁰⁷ Understanding the arc of their story – from hopeful commissioning through increasing turmoil to eventual condemnation and anguish – is important. So too is appreciating how the historiography of the movement has reflected contemporary concerns, from the white hot reactions of those involved in the events of 1946–1954, through the hopes raised by Vatican II, and the rise of liberation theology, to concern over the gradual disappearance from the stage of the actors in the drama. The movement represents a genuine attempt to bring both word and deed to bear on the plight of the least fortunate in France at a time when their alienation from the faith was a cause of major concern among French Catholics.

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¹⁰⁷The “Trajectoires et Origines 2” (TEO2) survey undertaken by the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies and released in April 2023 revealed that “only 25% of French people aged 18–59 declared themselves to be Catholic in 2020, compared with 43% in 2008 according to the Trajectoires et Origines 1 survey” (see Solene Tadié, “Catholicism in France Could Soon Become a Minority but a More Traditional One, Experts Claim,” *National Catholic Register*; available at <https://www.ncregister.com/news/catholicism-in-france-could-soon-become-a-minority-but-a-more-traditional-one-experts-claim>). Similar trends are visible throughout much of Europe. Meanwhile, as far back as 2005, experts were noting that “More than two-thirds of Catholics live in the developing world, and population projections clearly indicate that proportion will grow to three-fourths in the next four decades” (see “The Changing Demographics of Roman Catholics,” *Population Reference Bureau*; available at <https://www.prb.org/resources/the-changing-demographics-of-roman-catholics/#:~:text=Growth%20Across%20the%20Developing%20World&text=From%202004%20to%202050%2C%20Catholic,38%20percent%20in%20North%20America>).

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