

Louis-Joseph Lebret, O.P. 1897-1966

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From social action to the struggle for development

by Vincent Cosmao, O.P.

The Pope's encyclical on Development, *Populorum Progressio*, has drawn attention to a man, Père Lebret, who is better known in many parts of the Third World than in Europe and particularly in the English-speaking world, but whose life is, nevertheless, expressive of one of the main trends that have marked the development of humanity and of the Church during the last decades.

In marking him out as one of the principal instigators of this encyclical,¹ Paul VI knew better than anyone that he had not intervened in its detailed preparation simply as an expert, but that it was his experience and his life which had given him the essential inspiration for it. And those who knew him realize that his work and thought are one with his life; so much so, that if his writings were to pass away, in the way writings do, there would still remain the mark he has left on the history of his time and the direction which, largely thanks to him, some men and some commissions have given to their life and work.

In our present preoccupation with the problem of our relations with the Third World, it would, therefore, seem to be useful to recount the main stages of his life, in order to understand better some of the forces which determine the direction of history in the sense of an ever closer interdependence of nations.

1. *A Childhood and Youth open to the World*

L. J. Lebret was born on the 26th June, 1897, at Le Minihic-sur-Rance, not far from the site of the tidal power station which now exists, into a family of sailors which was closely connected with the peasant families of that small semi-agricultural, semi-maritime region. His childhood, open to Cape Horn and rooted in the fields of the small farms near by, marked him out, he used to say at the end of his life, to be a citizen of the world. There he found, too, firmly based traditions and connexions which made him a pioneer anxious to preserve continuity even while promoting change, able to discern the growing-points of tradition and history. It was in this way that on the estuary of the Rance at high tide, he who could scull a boat before he went to school, knew how to drift with the current, or how to avoid it.

¹However, considering the exceptional gifts of intellect and experience that were his, I have been authorized to declare that Père Lebret, who died on the 20th of July last, has been one of the experts consulted.' (Extract from the press conference given by Mgr Poupard 28.3.67 in presenting the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* to the world.)

In February, 1915, breaking off the classical preparation for the naval college, he joined the navy as junior cadet, competing for entrance to L'Ecole Navale. After a first tour of duty on the battleship *Jauréguiberry* of the Naval Forces of the East, he took up his studies again at the Ecole Navale, and upon graduation in 1917 was placed third. He completed the war as an officer of manoeuvres on the anti-torpedo vessel *Bouclier* of the Dunkirk flotilla, which formed part of the Dover Patrol. He took part in different operations, among which were the blockades of Zeebrugge and Ostend.

After the war, he was in turn instructor at the course for the higher diploma for naval officers, controller of the movement of shipping in the port of Beirut and instructor at L'Ecole Navale. In 1923, by this time first officer of a ship, and a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour, he left the navy to enter the Order of Preachers.

Before he finished his theological studies, he had to go, in 1929, to rest at St Malo, and this was the beginning of the activity which was to shape his whole life.

2. *The Fight for the Organization of Sea Fisheries*

Horrified by the degrading conditions of work and life of the fishermen and their families on the coast of Brittany, Père Lebreton joined with them in searching for an answer to the crisis caused by the first industrialization of the fisheries, by the internationalization of the fish trade and by the repercussions of the economic crisis.

Anxious about the spiritual well-being of peoples whose Christian traditions were beginning to be disturbed by changing living conditions, he helped in the foundation of Jeunesse Maritime Chrétienne (J.M.C.) and founded the Secrétariat Social Maritime. But he very soon discovered that what was necessary was to attack the evil at the root, in its causes, and to reorganize the whole economic activity of the fishing sector, the various professions connected with it and the relations of production and marketing. For years he went on pursuing his investigations, at first along the French coasts, then throughout Europe and in the Mediterranean basin, studying the fisheries and the fish trade. On the basis of this analysis and alongside the stimulation of trade union activity, he strove for the legislative reorganization of sea fisheries in France. . . . The statutes passed in 1938, 1941, 1945, have been thought the most important in this field since the time of Colbert.

3. *Economie et Humanisme*

This harsh experience had taught him that temporary social remedies did not solve the crisis of the modern world, and that the economy had to be completely re-thought and rebuilt in terms of *human economy*, an economy in the service of man.

What we mean by a 'human economy' goes beyond both the integration of the human element into the social sciences and the

integration of the social sciences. For us, a human economy, considered as a social system, would be an economy whose very functioning in countries developing differently over a short or a long term, not only would not impede, but would be favourable to human development.

As a science, human economy is the discipline that allows a system of human economy to be established by stages: a socio-economic structure, offering men, the greatest possible number of men, a fully human life. Such a régime will never exist in the perfect state. What counts is to be reaching out towards it.

. . . If we had to define human economy we would call it a discipline of thought and action, at once a science and an art, enabling a specific and more or less homogeneous population to pass from a less human to a more human phase, at the fastest rate and at the least cost, considering the inter-related development of all peoples. (In *Economie et Humanisme*, No. 89, 1954.)

This prospect, which in those days might appear to be a noble Utopia, has become today one of the premises of all those who have not given up subordinating technical progress to that of humanity and who believe that man can master what he has made in the furtherance of his own all-round fulfilment.

In order to deepen and enlarge his insights, his investigations and his work, he founded in 1942 *Economie et Humanisme*, a centre for studying social complexes and for bringing into being teams of workers. Even under the German occupation, and more than ever at the liberation, this had a very large following. Here was a new inspiration in the trends of social Catholicism, and one which influenced a wider, and younger, set of people. Many ideas put forward at this time, e.g. in the domain of urbanization or of land use, are today coming to fruition. But above all, the men who found enlightenment and guidance in their lives at that time are now carrying on the work almost everywhere in the world.

4. *Fight for Development: The I.R.F.E.D.*

Invited by the School of Sociology and Politics of San Paolo, Brazil, in 1947, to give a series of introductory lectures on human economy, Père Lebrét, constantly travelling for the purposes of study and fact-finding, made the discovery of under-development. This was the second great shock of his life, a discovery which, like the discovery of the miserable conditions of the sea fishermen's lives in 1929, came more and more to shape his whole life's work. Gradually leaving what he had undertaken in France and Europe to his fellow-workers, he began to travel round the area that later came to be called the Third World, seeking solutions to the dramatic crisis of under-development, the range and depth of which he never ceased to explore. His method was the one which had proved itself in the fisheries: observation, analysis of the facts, investigation of the causes, assessment of needs and possibilities, definition of prospects,

working out of programmes and of plans, the training of qualified and committed men, mobilization of the peoples and of the centres of decision-making.

Latin America kept him working for years. He flew over it, observing all the time, travelled about in every direction, and directed studies on the needs and possibilities for development in several States of Brazil and in Columbia.

But he was already worried about the rest of the world, observing it in brief study trips, awakening opinion everywhere to the drama of the century, which had scarcely roused people's consciences.

In 1953 he was one of the six experts at the U.N. Conference on the measurement of living standards. He managed to combine a demand for strict scientific rigour in the analysis of problems with a prophetic call for the mobilization of all mankind in the struggle for development.

The clear fact soon forced itself on his mind that he must create a new centre of action, a new team in order to perfect the tools of analysis and the methods of programming, and in order to train men able to attack the problem of development on the world-wide scale demanded, men committed to the struggle for expansion. In 1958 he founded I.R.F.E.D. (International Institute of Research and Training towards Integrating Development).

5. *International Action*

(a) International organizations.

Though he always started from the ground up, from men actually grappling with development, examining the needs and possibilities of expansion by socio-economic micro-analysis at the level of the village or small district, Père Lebret was pre-eminently a man for synthesis and world vision. Even though he was convinced that development always gets off the ground only when the people directly involved take over responsibility themselves, he saw nevertheless that all progress was blocked in advance by the very mechanisms of international exchange. For him, to change the world became more and more the condition of a development which, in any case, concerns not only the countries in process of expansion, but the future of all men.

As his understanding of the world drama grew broader, his attention was drawn more and more to strategic points, where decisions on the necessary changes can be made. The U.N. and its agencies seemed to him to be among these strategic points.¹ To him every opportunity to awaken leaders to bring the real problems into the light, was a good one. His dealings with the highest international civil servants multiplied, the Holy See made him its representative at the great international conferences. The U.N. Conference on

¹cf. *Développement et Civilisations*, No. 19, September 1964: 'Vers une restructuration des Nations-Unies', by L. J. Lebret.

Trade and Development at Geneva in 1964 was one of the occasions on which he made a significant contribution and which left a mark on him for the few years of life which remained to him.

We must explore new ways which respect basic liberties as much as possible, while subjecting them to the strict disciplines which are indispensable at the international level in order to stop the growing disparity in standards of living between privileged peoples and peoples scientifically and technically less well developed. I will go further: our delegation believes that the total resources of the world should be used in such a way that all men may benefit from them. I repeat: that all the goods of this world ought to be exploited for the benefit of all mankind and that the distribution of goods produced by all may be carried out in such a manner that all those who do not yet enjoy a dignified standard of life, or those who because of the poverty of their soil and of their sub-soil or of their physical energies cannot hope to escape extreme poverty, may have their essential needs satisfied and reach a level of living that is consistent with human dignity. (Extracts from the speech delivered by L. J. Lebret at Geneva, 1964.)

Several of those who attended thought his speech at this Conference was the most important one given, along with that of Che Guevara.

6. *Vatican II. Gaudium et Spes, Populorum Progressio*

The Catholic Church and the other Christian churches appeared to him to be other strategic points at which the future of the world might, in part, be decided. The vastness of the task demands, in fact, the mobilization of spiritual forces just as much as it needs political economic or social action. As an expert at the Council, he participated actively, even passionately, in the working out of the pastoral constitution of the Church in the world today, challenging men quite as much as preparing texts. For example, he had various patristic writings on poverty duplicated and distributed in the corridors; these he had been collecting and meditating on all his life. At the same time, Pope Paul VI asked him to prepare the draft of an encyclical on the development of nations, a work the results of which he never saw, though his philosophy pervades it completely, and the Pope himself presented the encyclical as a 'tribute to his memory'.

He also collaborated in setting several Roman commissions on foot and in particular helped a working-group charged with preparing the new organization called for by the Council and which was to become the Pontifical Commission 'Justice and Peace'.

7. *Return to his Father's House*

Already gravely ill, Père Lebret nevertheless still hoped to be granted two more years, in which he could gather together his experience and his thoughts in some fundamental writings.

Having found out, especially in the latter years, how much he was limited, at international meetings, by his inability to express himself in English, he went for a rest to some friends in London in June, 1966, with the idea of perfecting his knowledge of the language. But God was waiting for him.

On returning to France, he was still able to express his wishes for the future of I.R.F.E.D. in greater detail. Then quite suddenly his health deteriorated further, and on the 20th of July, 1966, his end came, after he had summed up in a few words his life's work and meaning and fixed the line to be followed in the fight he had begun.

His last words were spoken to the nurses who were looking after him: 'How beautiful life is! You have to be tossed about for the sake of others to show the good Lord you have understood.'

8. *Shaping Forces*

One of the main lessons to emerge from his life is the invitation to look at the destiny of the world unflinchingly, to analyse the problems to be solved rigorously in order to make possible a universal upward movement of humanity, to grapple with misery in its causes, and, in order to do all this, to change the world. For everything is inter-connected in a world where interdependence is increasing and the necessary organizations have to be adapted to a reality thoroughly understood alike in its inconsistencies and its shaping forces.

But neither exactness in analysis and organization nor reason is enough to create a more humane world. Men themselves, peoples, societies, must reawaken and organize themselves in order to take their destiny into their own hands. Men and nations cannot be developed from without. They alone can develop themselves by using their creativity, which is the expression of their calling to growth and to the control of this growth, in the service of a design which gives meaning to their lives.

The chief problem that faces the world at present is one of civilization. The exploitation of resources could have the result of dehumanizing mankind. Development could cloak new kinds of exploitation of men. Distribution might tend simply to strengthen the privileges of prosperous nations. As long as the primary aim is not a truly brotherly co-operation between men of all callings in every nation and between peoples at all levels of development in the whole of mankind, the tensions between social classes and between nations or groups of nations, will not cease to produce sharp conflicts, periodically jeopardizing the partial advances gained in different places. (Unpublished paper dating from 1953, used again in expanded form in *Dynamique concrète du développement* by L. J. Lebret.)

Hence there arises the necessity, in order to change the world, to appeal to the living springs of men and of nations, to the depths in man where meaning and the vital impulse mature. What counted most for Père Lebret was the 'breath' of inspiration which animates

people and groups of people. This was for him the very breath of God, the Spirit of love. Love expressing itself in merciful compassion.

In reviewing my whole life, I realize that it has been greatly influenced by the meaning which Père Barnabé Augier gave to the word compassion. The beatitude of mercy has been paramount for me, on a par with the beatitude of gentleness and that of the fight for justice.

To have compassion is to open one's heart to all aspects of human misery, as one gradually discovers them. For me, it is an essential element of being one with Christ.

My life has developed logically from that point: the fight against the destitution of sea-faring people, particularly of fishermen, the struggle against the senselessness of capitalism, the struggle against false ideas of humanism. It was during this period that I discovered that instead of wearing oneself out fighting isolated evils, one must attack their causes. (From L. J. Lebret's unpublished papers, June, 1966.)

This word compassion, which was the key word of his life, clearly did not have the least sentimental or paternalistic overtones. It expressed an existential fellowship with every man who strives to unite the world under a common destiny and collectively to create the structures which the realization of this aspiration calls for. To love is to identify oneself with one's neighbour, with all men, and to create with them the conditions for their self-fulfilment.

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