

## 'WORKER MY BROTHER'

SOME years have already passed since the Abbé Godin in his book *France, pays de mission?*<sup>1</sup> gave us a rather sad summing up of enquiries made into the increasing paganism in French towns. The book was followed by others revealing a similar state of affairs in the country and showing clearly where effort must be made at the present time. It is comforting, therefore, to realise what steps have already been taken to meet the situation; and even if it is only a start we can hope for its success when the seed will grow and ripen.

The name of Père Loew may be familiar to some who have read the short account of his work in *En mission proletarienne*.<sup>2</sup> Père Loew had previously written a lesser-known book, *Les dockers de Marseilles; ou, comment se crée le proletariat*; and he also delivered some lectures on the work he has been doing. These lectures were the most striking evidence of the sincerity of his mission; delivered without sentiment or pathos but with the simplicity of truth built on real experience they conveyed a feeling of unspeakable sorrow for the workers.

In his book and lectures Père Loew has given a vivid account of his five years' work among the worst class of workers—the worst, he says, because their job is the most insecure of all. It can be visualised: crowds of ragged men coming to the docks very early in the morning hoping—though without any assurance—to find work for the day. It always depends on the ships that are in dock for unloading. Some days there is practically no work and the worker has to return to an anxious wife and hungry children. Père Loew took on himself this life of uncertainty and hard work. He heaved the sacks of coal. . . . He said that the first time he signed on for this job he was covered with confusion as after a few steps he stumbled and upset the whole sack of coal. However, his new comrades were full of sympathy and showed him how to manage. Like them his face and hands were grimed and his clothes ragged and dirty; with them he had to go through heat and cold, hunger and thirst, and extreme weariness. With them he would go to the shabby little restaurant and share the same coarse meal. He would share, too, the same close, stuffy and verminous lodgings. He would find himself among strange neighbours—ragmen, gipsies, Arabs, sharp-voiced shrews, tattered urchins already stealing from their fathers—when they had any; and there

<sup>1</sup> *France, pays de mission?* by Abbé Godin (Cerf—Blackfriars).

<sup>2</sup> *En mission proletarienne* by R. P. Loew (Economie et Humanisme, Paris).

was the criminal-looking fellow anyone else would have avoided at all costs at night.

Gradually Père Loew gained their acquaintance and even their confidence. But it took time and he had to go through many trials. Among his experiences he has treasured many droll anecdotes. One day a fellow-worker hinted delicately that he had a daughter, a bright girl and a good house-mistress too—she would make an excellent little wife. Père Loew was serious in his gratitude, but he had to confess that he was otherwise engaged. The man was sorry; he thought it a great pity as he was really fond of this somewhat mysterious worker.

Père Loew was always aching to help those miserable people whose needs he felt so acutely. He learned to recognise beneath the wretched exterior the gentle kindness for one another, the simple frankness of those suffering men, and above all the anxious desire for human sympathy. Certainly they were a coarse and often unattractive people. But then want, neglect and a precarious life pressed heavily on them. I believe it is St John of the Cross who has written: 'Where there is no love do you sow love and you will then reap love'. The most pathetic lesson to be learnt from Père Loew's words is that no one can pretend to a real knowledge of the proletariat unless he has lived the same life with all its real hardships and suffering. Charles de Foucauld had already taught this same truth when he left his monastic cell because he could not bear to lead his quiet life while across the barren wastes of sand hundreds of thousands were crying for spiritual help. He had heard the words of the gospel: 'He that findeth his life shall lose it and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it'. Foucauld made the choice: he would lose life, land and all that he had held most dear, he would leave all to win all. He went a Touareg among Touaregs, his brothers. . . . Since then the message has been heard by other apostles willing to follow in Charles de Foucauld's footsteps.

By now, too, Père Loew's attempt has been understood and other towns besides Marseilles will wonder at the queer people who choose to don a dirty boiler-suit in lieu of their nice white habits. For another Dominican Father has been doing similar work in northern France. Having obtained leave from his superiors he had first to become an apprentice among lads much younger than he. Having learnt his factory job, he began work in a manufactory until he should be able to win a certificate to be able to present himself at any factory as a qualified 'hand'. In this way he will be able to get in touch with workers of every description; and from his experience he realises that a hard task lies ahead of him. He is working out the system of the

new apostolate. It seems that they will live, two or three of them together, in some workers' district, and gradually get the workers used to their presence, gain their confidence and mix as much as possible in the ordinary daily life of the place. At the same time at least one of the small group will always be working at the factory because it is essential that their fellow workers should realise that they have to earn their own living.

This will certainly seem a hazardous experiment to many, but they are taking no hasty steps. The Fathers, who entered this way of life in view of the sad plight of Christians today, have no doubt that this is in strict accord with the Dominican spirit. When they go off to this apostolate of the worker they feel at one with their holy Father who would go barefoot on the roads of southern France to be the more persuasive in his words to the heretic. As has already been stated in this review: 'St Dominic adopted up-to-date methods to propagate eternal truth'.<sup>3</sup> It is the same today: St Dominic's sons are anxious to meet the needs of the times with the means of the times. The problem which they must solve is how to win back this huge multitude of their 'brethren' who have been enticed away from their fold, how to enlighten their darkness with Truth. . . . 'Not by bread alone doth man live but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God' (Matt. 4, 4).

To return to Père Loew we may quote in conclusion from his own book. He had been joined by a fellow Dominican with permission to say Mass in the evening: 'Every night a few neighbours would drop in. At times those who for some reason felt unworthy of being present at the ceremony would send flowers to represent them, flowers they had bought for this purpose. But far more beautiful than all the flowers were the simple actions of that priest who had been working all day in the docks, of that priest whose every genuflection and gesture bear the trace of all the burdens he has been carrying. . . . The mystery of redemption there being re-enacted on the very spot where it is most needed'.

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*(Of the French Congregation of the Holy Rosary.)*

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<sup>3</sup> BLACKFRIARS, March, 1945.