

THE PARISH AS A MISSIONARY
COMMUNITY

COLOMBES is a working-class district on the outskirts of Paris with a population of about 23,000. For the last five years it has been the scene of an experiment whose importance can scarcely be exaggerated, and the latest volume of *Rencontres*⁽¹⁾ is a detailed account of the work of the Abbé Michonneau and the group of priests who are engaged in evangelizing a parish in which practising Catholics number scarcely five per cent. of the population. It would be impertinent to praise a document whose whole purpose is to make available to priests everywhere the fruits of day-to-day experience of the hardest apostolate of all. Much of the detail in these five hundred pages has special reference to conditions in France, but the methods described—and above all the spirit they manifest—are of the liveliest relevance for all priests at work in a pagan world.

'The proletariat is pagan. Not because it doesn't "practise," but because its mentality is pagan, wholly alien to the Christian spirit, indifferent to the teaching we offer, careless of the demands of the moral standards we proclaim.' At once, then, it is necessary to distinguish between the *Christian* parish, where the Church is still recognized for what she is, and the *missionary* parish in a pagan environment. 'Our methods must be revised if not totally changed.' As Cardinal Suhard has remarked, 'We must free ourselves from every sort of narrow traditionalism and adapt ourselves to present needs.' Hence, 'since 95 per cent. of the Church's children don't come to her, 95 per cent. of the Church's concern and activity must be directed towards *them*. And not only by groanings and optimistic hopes, but in reality.'

What, then, is the 'parish'? Is it the faithful few or the apostate many? 'The life of my parish is the life of everybody who lives in it. . . . We no longer go after the sheep that is lost; we let the ninety-nine lost ones romp about freely on the mountain-side while we argue about who is to have the care of the hundredth one that is faithful.' This is not to minimise the importance of the parish as it exists. On the contrary, it is the foundation of the apostolate, it is the cell of the divine incarnation here and now; from it must spring the life which, under God, will fill those pagan streets and bring them in reality under its shelter. The history of the early Church provides the model, by which a small group can become a triumphant community.

(1) *Paroisse, Communauté Missionnaire, par l'Abbé Michonneau, présenté par le R.P. Chéry, O.P.* (Paris: Editions du Cerf; 150 francs.)

It is no accident that the epithet 'parochial' has come to have its current meaning.

The Abbé Michonneau proceeds to discuss the methods by which the parish can begin its work of 'conquest.' First of all 'through a living and missionary liturgy'; this must be communal, and suited to the special purpose it serves. (It must be borne in mind that the context of these suggestions is the *missionary* parish.) 'Those present at Mass in our church are participants. The communal response to the prayers of the celebrant has become so familiar that it calls for no comment. So, too, a communal *attitude*: it has now become almost a matter of instinct. No one thinks of praying otherwise at Mass than as part of the community. Everybody follows the Mass closely. Sometimes, in addition to the Latin responses, we have a choir reciting in French a prayer or a hymn which translates the prayers or the gestures of the priest at a particular moment of the Mass. No singing by a schola; it is the whole congregation that sings and prays, with the priests present among them. Sometimes Mass is celebrated facing the people, at an altar in the midst of the congregation. But usually Mass is offered in the normal place, but so that everyone can easily follow. On Sundays the bread and wine are placed on a plinth in the middle of the nave, whence it is fetched by the servers at the Offertory. Hence the offering is taken from the midst of the faithful. There is only one collection, taken during the *Credo*. Bench fees have been abolished.'

On the greater feasts, the liturgical setting has been freely adapted so that the people can see redemption 'at work,' as it were. Thus at Christmas, the Midnight Mass is preceded by a dramatic showing forth of the world's need of a Saviour, the rejection of the Saviour by the world (at home, at work, in men's hearts), the birth of Christ, the acceptance of Christ (the shepherds, etc.) This is performed by four choirs, using traditional carols and scriptural prophecies, and the stage on which the action takes place finally becomes the altar of the Midnight Mass. At Christmas, 1944, no fewer than 1,800 people followed the whole action with the greatest devotion.

Again, there are special festivals to honour the Gospel, Baptism (ending with the solemn baptism of a dozen adults), and so on. 'Our aim is the creation of a catechetical and missionary liturgy, not in opposition to the traditional liturgy, but alongside of it and in harmony with it, so that we can evangelize the crowds who are ignorant of Christ and are influenced by action and speech more than by passive listening. In other words, we treat adults as children, which of course they are in their utter ignorance of religion.' At the administration of the sacraments, special care is taken to see that those present should realise what is happening. 'While one priest administers bap-

tism, another explains what it is all about. We give those present a little book specially drawn up for their use, with all the prayers translated into French, and with a brief commentary on them. Marriages and funerals are a valuable opportunity to manifest the Church's care for her children. All the hideous distinctions of solemnity dependent on the fees paid have been abolished at Colombes.

What about the use of Latin? 'For the Christian community, Latin, certainly; but well translated and carefully adapted, with plainchant, but only in its simpler, more singable form, and without excluding altogether French hymns. But for the masses we have to convert, we use French, a fresh vernacular in the spirit of the liturgy.' It should be added that the Abbé Michonneau envisages the Mass (which is of course in Latin) as proper to the Christian as such; the catechumens are evangelised *in preparation* for that, and hence there are used extra-liturgical means, looking forward to the liturgical ideal proper to a Christian community.

The second section of this volume of *Rencontres* deals with the Missionary Apostolate, and first of all with the question of *Oeuvres*, the multiplicity of societies, sodalities and good works that play so prominent a part in contemporary French Catholicism. As to organisations concerned with leisure, they have been wholly abolished so far as the clergy are concerned. 'Is it our job as priests to look after children and amuse them? Our job is to convert, to educate, to preach the Gospel, to administer the sacraments.' This of course does not mean that the children are neglected. But it does mean that a priest is not an athlete or an entertainer, and the passion for 'Catholic' football, and so forth, can use up energies desperately needed in the apostolate *as such*—the 'direct apostolate' of the Gospel to which the Abbé Michonneau repeatedly returns. Even organisations more obviously related to the Church's mission can be a restriction of the universal mission of the priest in a missionary parish. 'For the last fifty years priests have consoled themselves for the loss of one kingdom by the conquest of another: having failed to keep the men, they have got busy organising the women; having failed to hold grown-ups they have gone in search of youth; and since youth is difficult to attract, they have fallen back on children. They provide a safe territory, an assured kingdom, even though it isn't the whole kingdom of God'. Too often young priests are all for J.O.C., Scouts, and other 'movements' excellent in themselves. But the movement *par excellence* is the apostolate—and everything else must give place to that.

Even works of charity precisely *as organised* can interfere with the priest's primary concern. So far as possible they should be left to the lay organisations. Specialised movements (such as the J.O.C.),

too, should be given the fullest autonomy; their whole strength lies in the fact that they are *not* 'clerical'. They are trained by the clergy, it is true, but in their own activities they must be allowed a proper freedom so that they may penetrate those places where a mere clericalism can never hope to go. 'All such movements, indeed every activity in the parish, must be integrated in the single stream of conquest for Christ that must unite a missionary parish'.

The *direct* apostolate is the work of every priest in such a parish, and it must be exercised in two ways: through the contacts he seeks out, and through those that come to him. Hurried visits from house to house in a parish of thousands is extravagant of time and dubiously valuable. By dividing the parish into areas, and by enlisting the aid of lay apostles ('les militants' who play so important a part at Colombes), it has been possible to arrange *réunions à domicile*, i.e. meetings of a dozen or more people in a house where the priest comes *as a priest* and by prayer and discussion with those present is able to prepare the way for the working of grace. The accounts of the great success of these gatherings, recalling as they do the practice—and the faith—of apostolic times, show that such methods succeed in a milieu where the methods traditional in a Christian parish are useless. The training of the lay apostles is one of the most important of the priest's tasks, but here—as always—the emphasis is simply on the apostolate as such.

There is no room to quote the countless details given in this profoundly valuable book showing how the principles of this missionary apostolate have been triumphantly vindicated. Statistics prove very little, but in fact the attendance at Mass on Sundays has risen from an average of 1,000 in 1941 to 1,300 in 1945, Easter Communion from 850 to 1375. The work is still largely preparatory, tilling a field that has been neglected for a very long time. One of the great merits of the book is its informal style, consisting as it does of a dialogue between the Abbé Michonneau and Père Chery, who has put the material together. This means that high-sounding theories are invariably implemented by concrete illustrations. A magnificent section on the necessity of direct, living preaching suited to the capacity of a de-christianised congregation contains some salutary reminders of what happens too often: appeals for cash, cliché-ridden generalisations, sweet banalities. 'If the salt lose its savour, where-with shall it be salted?' Too often a sermon echoes Claudel's answer, but without his irony: 'With sugar'.

It would be wholly wrong to seem to suggest that *Paroisse, Communauté Missionnaire* is querulous, merely a negative complaint. Even its most severe strictures, as in the section on the cash-element in contemporary parochial life, are inspired by a burning zeal for the

Kingdom of God. And at every turn there is ample proof of the purifying effect of experience and a touching humility in recalling it. There are many signs just now of the strength of the Catholic revival in France, and this latest volume of an already historic series is assuredly one of the most hopeful.

ILLTUD EVANS, O.P.

RED ARMY SOLDIER

WE all know Tommy Atkins. In two wars he has become symbolic of the British soldier. We know what he thinks, how he will react to most events, and his general likes and dislikes. He has been hailed as 'Britain's best ambassador'. In foreign countries his demeanour has been one of kindly tolerance, cheerfulness, and some degree of self-effacement. All in all, these things have built themselves into a reasonably understandable character.

What of Ivan Ivanovitch, 'Tommy Atkins' of the Red Army? There are three million of his kind in occupied Europe, stretching from the Balkans to the Arctic, and from the Russian frontier to Central Germany. Can we define a general character for Ivan Ivanovitch, whose rôle is such a significant part of the international play being performed in Europe today?

I have known a hundred Ivans. I have seen him in this aftermath of war. I have seen the results of his handiwork. But my knowledge is coloured by the difference between the Oriental and the Occidental minds. This barrier is a constant difficulty, necessitating a re-examination of every event. For instance, there was the Red Army soldier who deprived an Austrian of his wireless set, then, as he was leaving, dug his free hand beneath his tunic, brought forth a jade ornament and thrust it at the Austrian, saying: 'A present for me from Hungary. I give it to you for this present' (pointing to wireless set). The interest of the situation lies in the word, 'present'. Was the expression meant humorously, as you and I might have said it? Or did the Red Army soldier interpret finding as keeping? Closer acquaintance with Ivan shows that it is legal for the Red Army soldier to possess what he finds, as long as the article is not required by the State. Hence, there was no humour or veiled sarcasm in the soldier's remark to the Austrian.

Then, also, there is the difference between 'Muscovite' Ivan and 'Kasakh' Ivan, as much difference as exists between a Londoner