

NOTRE DAME — SAINT ALBAN

ON the outskirts of Lyons a vast monolith of a hospital commemorates the secular patron of that city of martyrs—Edouard Herriot. You take the bouncing tram from Place Bellecour (the Germans stole the trolleybuses), and at Blanche Grange you enquire for the church of Notre Dame—Saint Alban. It is hidden away behind the clinical cliffs of the hospital, and there is little enough about this plain box of a church to make it remarkable. But it is precisely here, amidst a sprawling suburb of flats and hostels, of workmen's dwellings and doctors' villas, that for the last twenty-five years the abbé Laurent Remillieux has built up a Christian community which by this is known throughout France and beyond.

How did it happen? Père Chéry, who in his *Paroisse Communauté Missionnaire* so vividly recorded the achievement of the Abbé Michonneau in the industrial parish of Colombes, has now published an account of the Lyonese parish which goes far to answer that question.¹ Even the casual visitor to Saint Alban is aware that this is no ordinary church; or rather that here is a most ordinary church in which is realised the true function of a house of God, the meeting-place of God's people, a living community of the faithful made one *per ipsum et cum ipso et in ipso*.

The parish numbers eight thousand people. Of these some three hundred and fifty can be said to belong to the 'community'. These are the faithful who have a living sense of their Catholicism, who enter regularly into the communal worship of the church. As many again would describe themselves as Catholics, of varying degrees of allegiance. One in twelve, therefore, of the population is Catholic. And this is the average for Lyons, a more Catholic city than most—a reminder, if need be, of the vast territory of unbelief that remains to be conquered. But statistics matter less than the vitality of the existing Christian family. And here the basic distinction by the Abbé Michonneau needs to be remembered. The Christian parish is the means of evangelisation of the missionary parish that lies beyond. The first task, therefore, is the building up of the central city of the faithful: its sanctity and solidarity are the prerequisites of its extension.

At Notre Dame—Saint Alban, the stress has up to now fallen on: the formation of the Christian *élite* (no snobbery here: 'you have not chosen me . . .'). As the Abbé Remillieux explains: 'For the work of rechristianisation we must first of all have communities who are

¹ *Notre Dame—Saint Alban* par H. C. Chéry, O.P. (Cerf; Blackfriars).

living a completely Christian life, who refuse to be mediocre. They are preparing themselves for ultimate growth through their practical realisation of the Charity of Christ and through their united worship of the Father through his Son in churches which are truly holy places, where all worldliness is put aside, where a lying formalism has no place'. It is, in the jargon of our time, a question of priorities. As so often, the analogy of the Church's first centuries suggests itself. Before the Christian life could impose itself on, and finally conquer, the world of Rome there were the centuries of hidden life, humble but confident, ready for martyrdom. And in face of a paganism no less powerful there is need for a formation no less patient.

Of all the features of contemporary French Catholicism, a pre-occupation with money is the most distressing, and perhaps the most destructive of that union in charity which should mark the Christian parish. Certainly money is necessary, and the poverty of many priests is a sad reality. To the unbeliever the Church is merely a business affair; the clergy are in it because it is their livelihood. The unending series of collections, the tariffs for chairs, the graduated fees for marriages and funerals: all this goes ill with a belief in the primacy of spiritual things. So argued the Abbé Remillieux, and his first action on coming to Saint Alban was to abolish all collections and fees. Instead he placed a box at the end of the church marked 'Vie de l'âme'. In it the faithful deposit what they will in an envelope, which may mention some spiritual need or acknowledge some benefit received but which may never bear a name. Any gift from a known donor is returned. Thus the offering is wholly free, and the priest retains complete liberty of action with regard to all his parishioners. Each week, in the parochial bulletin (*Semaine Religieuse et Familiale*) a simple balance sheet is printed, showing what have been the expenses incurred and what sums have been received. The very active *Maison d'Oeuvres* in the parish (which provides every variety of social service) is financed from the same source. And the system works. What is necessary is never lacking, and 'the greatest obstacle to the life of a community has been conquered'. It might be added that the parish contains no notably rich people; the sums received are never large. But the sense of a shared responsibility is adequate to deal with the material needs of the parish, which are accepted as the concern of all.

The setting of the life of a Christian community is the liturgy, and Saint Alban is probably best known (or most notorious—it depends on the views of the reporter) for its liturgical activity. One must see for oneself. An account, however detailed, can deal only with external things: it can scarcely convey the conviction one has that there the

public prayer of the faithful—however surprisingly expressed—springs from a deep understanding of the meaning of a Christian vocation. The church itself is a plain square building, innocent of architecture, in which nothing distracts you from the altar—a simple long table with two candlesticks. Mass is offered facing the people, not with the intention of providing a novelty but merely to aid that active participation in the liturgy which expresses the *life* of the Christian family. The celebrant's gestures, the dialogue with the congregation, the reading of epistle and gospel are certainly given a greater reality. It goes without saying that the practice has the permission of the Cardinal Archbishop of Lyons. During the week the community mass is at 6.15, so that the faithful can attend before they go to work. Every mass is answered by the whole congregation, grouped about the altar. On Sundays the community mass is at 8 and is always sung. A second priest usually reads the epistle and gospel in French and provides, too, a running commentary on the liturgy of the day. For some people there is perhaps not enough room for silence at Saint Alban. But there is no doubt (and the point is emphasised in *La Messe et sa Catéchèse*²) that the Tridentine decrees require a catechetical instruction during the mass (*inter Missarum celebrationem*) 'especially on Sundays and great feasts, whether an explanation of one of the readings from Sacred Scripture or of one or other of the rites of the most holy sacrifice'.

There is no room to give a detailed account of the communal worship at Saint Alban, with the 'real' offertory made by the faithful, the mentioning of those to be prayed for at the *Memento* of the Canon, the solemn procession to Holy Communion (with the singing of the psalm with its antiphon), and the corporate thanksgiving after mass. These details must be judged in relation to the end they serve, namely the life of a community, a praying family which accepts the social implications of its prayer. There is no suggestion of preciousness; indeed one might feel that there is too little consideration for the *mysterium* of worship. Perhaps one may attempt to understand too much?

The administration of the Sacraments at Saint Alban is a magnificent revelation of the springs of a Christian community's life. Baptism, the sacrament of Christian initiation, is a family feast; it has the solemnity and joy that properly belong to it. 'Baptism', says the parish priest, 'is essentially the affair of the community. . . . What nonsense to make of it a private thing, almost clandestine! All the parish is concerned, and so it takes place on Sundays at the community mass'. The traditional rites are exactly observed, but they are *explained*. A delightful touch: the godmother holds the newly-bap-

² Conf. Blackfriars Publications; 15s. 0d.

tised child in her arms as she receives Holy Communion. The occasional baptism of adults is an occasion of special solemnity. 'First Communion' has been separated entirely from the purely social environment which makes of it in so many French parishes the ending of a Catholic life instead of its beginning. The emphasis is placed on the renewal of the baptismal promises and the initiation of a responsible Christian life. The sacrament of marriage, too, is placed in the context of the life of the community and is, as far as possible, administered before the Sunday community mass—as is the ceremony of espousal, which has been given back its original meaning at Saint Alban.

Funerals, again, are the concern of the whole community, and the mass of requiem is always at an hour when most of the faithful can attend 'to bid farewell to one of their number who has parted for eternity'. All the vulgarity of *Pompes Funébres* has been abolished from the church. And one of the most moving incidents recorded by Père Chéry is the conversion of an unbelieving professor of medicine who was profoundly moved by the spectacle of a funeral at Saint Alban, with its ceremonies reverently explained and its atmosphere of a family parting.

A description of 'what happens' in a small suburban church in Lyons might seem to have little relevance for anyone but its own parishioners. The important thing about Notre Dame—Saint Alban is not this or that innovation (circumstances alter: what is possible or desirable there may not be so elsewhere). The reality is what counts, and that quite simply is a matter for thanksgiving. There are practically no parochial organisations—no J.O.C., no women's leagues; and there is, as yet, little done directly for the unbelieving multitudes. But, as a result of years of hard work and harder prayer, the Abbé Remillieux has established in our time a Christian family, a parish that realises most deeply its unity in Christ. Of course it is, humanly, the work of one man, and anyone who has met him is left in no doubt that the Abbé Remillieux is a man of God who lives for nothing but the establishment of God's kingdom among those he is called to serve. It is good to know that his work will continue, for the parish on his death will pass to the *Prado*, a most apostolic congregation of secular priests founded in the diocese of Lyons by Père Chevrier, and whose novices already work at Notre Dame—Saint Alban.

It is a strange experience to turn from the simple presbytery at Saint Alban, where breakfast is an *agape* which continues most truly the spirit of the earlier sacrificial meal, to find oneself again amidst the wilderness of cafés and trams, with the vast hospital beyond. It is sad to think how little as yet this secular world, so desperately

sick and so pathetically eager for release, has been touched by the healing spirit of Notre Dame—Saint Alban. It will happen, but first of all there is the hard and patient work of preparation. That is true of all parishes everywhere. And that is why Père Chéry's book should be read by everyone who believes—and what Catholic cannot believe?—that the recovery of the Christian life demands, to begin with, an examination of conscience. *Notre Dame—Saint Alban* will help.

ILLTUD EVANS, O.P.

THE REALITY OF FAITH IN THE MODERN WORLD

IN the spring of 1939 I was asked by the editor of *Werkblätter*, one of the leading periodicals of the Catholic youth-movement in Germany, to contribute to the final number which he had been permitted to publish before this periodical had to cease to exist—to save paper, as it was said. We former contributors were asked to state what we felt was the most important duty of young Catholics of our time. Since soon afterwards I left Germany, I did not receive an offprint of that article, but some while ago a friend of mine presented me with an odd copy of that issue. When I read it again, it struck me that, in spite of the world-shaking events which had taken place in the meantime, the fundamental spiritual situation which we then considered had very little changed.

The editor had given my contribution the title 'Die lautere Wirklichkeit', which I may perhaps translate 'Reality, nothing but reality'. I still feel that the fundamental duty of Catholics in our time is to realise for themselves and for others that there are things which, though not belonging to the material and sensuous sphere, are real. It is the general characteristic of our age that its conception of reality is no longer derived from the external but from the internal world. Modern art, for example, does no longer aim at representing grapes so true to life that the birds would come and pick at them, but at representing either the grapeness of grapes or some other realisation of internal reality which, we may say, happened to arise from the sense-picture of grapes. Sometimes, I feel, Catholics are afraid of accepting this internal conception of reality, accepting not in the sense of adopting it, but of giving it credit, of believing that it is sincere, honest and intellectually decent. We are inclined to regard this conception of reality as conducive to false mysticism and to subjectivism.

I have shown elsewhere that while liturgical arts have benefited