

The Worker Priests:

History and Development Tendencies of a Movement Fallen into Oblivion {1}

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(translated from the German)

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"Although the experiment of the Worker priests - compared with its own objective: re-incarnation of the church in the working sphere - failed, one cannot deny that just the priests of the first generation clarified by their commitment many problems of the church and within the church, which are also today not solved yet. It remains a 'scandalon' that the 'system church' did not deal more humanly with those who realized their vocational mission as engaged and reliably as few priests only." {2}

With these words the article "worker priest" in the current third edition of the Encyclopedia for Theology and Church (Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche - LThK), the reference book for Catholic theology. This reminding and emphatic obituary still bearing in mind the reader is surprised to find in the weekly revue (Christ in der Gegenwart) in the year 2001 the following message: "About 450 'worker priests' met recently in Strasbourg, in order to consult about their future. [...] World-wide there are today about a thousand worker priests." {3}

Obviously, the worker priests live and work not only in the shadow of society, but also in the shadow of church and theological consciousness. So fast, as the worker priests had moved in the years 1953 and 1954 by the discussions about the church prohibition of the movement into the public interest, so fast the public forgot them also again.

This essay wants to present the emergence and development of the worker priest movement from the early forties over its prohibition 1954 and its re-strengthening after the Second Vatican Council. Apart from a historical outline also the theological, church-political and spiritual aspects are to be illustrated in this connection. {4}

1. The Development of the Worker Priest Movement up to its Prohibition

1.1. The French Church and the Workers in Early Twentieth Century

Since the end of the First World War, numerous Catholic movements and federations developed, in order to work against the progressing de-Christianization and alienation from church, which took place in France and Belgium above all among the workers and farmers. {5}

In this connection Joseph Cardijn established the 'Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne' (JOC) in Belgium. In the middle of the twenties the priest Georges Guérin, who - similarly as Cardijn - originated from a proletarian parents' house and had gained experiences as a minister in a worker quarter, followed Cardijn's example and brought the French branch of the JOC into being. The JOC saw the key for the re-Christianization of the workers in the pastoral work with young people: Engaged and motivated young Christians should act as disseminators among the workers, and so contribute to lead them back to the Christian values which seemed to be lost. This strategy of the JOC proved to be just as effective as it was original: From Paris French JOC spread into almost all industrial areas. In the second half of the thirties the JOC numbered approximately 65.000 members, and the 'Jeunesse Ouvrier', the newspaper of the JOC, appeared in an edition of just under 270.000 copies. {6}

The JOC saw itself as Christian alternative to the communist party and its trade union, and united in its program a pronounced commitment for social justice with a decided anti-Marxism. It was more

successful with its object than the 1919 created Catholic trade union C.F.T.C., which also wanted to offer a Christian alternative to the communist trade union.

Although the strength of the JOC lay in the fact that their activists were workers, it did nevertheless not succeed in penetrating the workers' milieu, since always only small circles became actually active. It became clear that a mission among the workers could be successful only, if appropriate connection offers were available. Likewise, it became apparent that it was impossible to integrate the workers into the existing parochial (middle-class) structures because of the evident differences of the milieus. {7}

1.2. The Roots of the Worker Priest Movement

On the basis of these insights and experiences one looked in France for new possibilities of overcoming the gap between church and working sphere. The initiative of the worker priests represents one of these attempts. The worker priest movement has neither a founder, nor a firm date of its foundation. There are rather several different roots, from which this missionary movement arose. In the following these roots are to be outlined shortly.

1.2.1. The Mission de France

In the year 1942 in Lisieux the seminar 'Mission de France' was opened, where priests should be trained to work in the future as pastors in rural and urban neo-pagan areas. An integral component of training was practical courses in factories or agriculture to make familiar the beginning priests with their mission activity among the industrial and agricultural workers on the margins. In the following two years two further seminaries of the Mission de France were established in Limoges and in Pontigny. {8}

1.2.2. About Sociological Studies for the Integration in the Workers' Milieu

The first worker priest was the Dominican Father Jaques Loew (1901-1999), even if the term was at that time not coined yet. In a sociological study he examined the connections between work and living conditions. To win better views into the life of the dock workers he began in the year 1941 to work in a shipyard in Marseille. Two years later he published his book 'Les dockers de Marseille' in which he described and criticized the bad conditions of work of the dock workers, and the situation of exploitation. {9}

Loew saw himself as intellectual, priest and worker together. He supported the dock-labourers and tried to improve their situation. But he did not completely dedicate himself to gainful employment but shouldered additionally the lead of a parish in Marseille. Later he created the secular institute 'Saints Pierre et Paul', which was likewise active in worker mission. {10}

1.2.3. French Priests in the German War Industry

A second root of the worker priest movement stands in direct connection with the events of the Second World War: The German occupation troops recruited approximately 800.000 forced labourers and volunteers for the employment in the German (armament-) industry in France. A pastoral support through French clergymen was forbidden to the church. The French bishops decided to dodge this prohibition and channelled twenty-five secular and regular priests into the labour camps. These 'undercover priests', who were selected from 200 volunteers, presented themselves - camouflaged as workers - for the employment in the German factories. {11}

From their basic intention these priests were not 'worker' priests yet. They wanted rather to guarantee the pastoral care among the French forced labourers in Germany. Since this pastoral

activity was forbidden, the priests were forced to work in a conspiratorial way on the place of work and in the barracks. {12}

If it was wise not to betray one's true identity just at the beginning, soon the insight was generally accepted by the priests that they could only as workers among workers share their reality. The Jesuit Father Henri Perrin writes about this: "We are anxious to take our place completely within our milieu, so that all workers regard us as their colleagues. With one word: Our aim is friendship." {13}

The priests realized soon that to pastoral care - understood as true friendship - belongs also the concern about the well-being of people and about their liberty. In Perrin's word:

"More and more I come to the conviction that Christ's apostles must appear to human beings like liberators, in whose proximity one breathes freedom and peace. We have to free ourselves of the wrong conception of the 'good herdsman' ... " {14}

With Perrin - similar as with other worker priests - the insight appears already very clearly that clericalism and the church's embodiment in the middle-class milieu made the contact to workers almost impossible. A bridging between the different worlds was possible only by a decided local change:

"They do not know the priest at all; they are separated from us and we from them by a deep gap. One could almost say that we live in different worlds. Everything at us repels them: our pious language, which they do not understand, our strange garment in the middle of the twentieth century, the condescending behaviour, which some of us have actually, our dependence on certain manners, which marks us inevitably as bourgeois people." {15}

The priests had to leave behind their clerical identity and their middle-class roots and had to acculturate themselves into the worker milieu.

1.2.4. Developments in the Consecrated Life and in Spirituality

At the beginning of the twentieth century some important developments within the range of religious life and spirituality happened, which were particularly important to the later development of the worker priest movement.

A central personality in this connection is Charles de Foucauld (1885-1916), one of "the strangest and moving servants of God in our time", as the magazine Herder-Korrespondenz wrote 1953 with pious astonishment. {16} Foucauld finally withdrew after a very much moved life as a hermit into an oasis in Algeria, where he led a contemplative life and wrote a rule. His spirituality fed on the great importance of manual work, on Jesus' presence in low, poor, miserable, and small beings, on mystical elements, and on his enthusiasm for Islam. {17}

In the year 1933 the French priest René Voillaume (1905-2003) took up the ideas and the spirituality of Foucauld, and began with five other priests to live in the Algerian desert according to the rule of Frère Charles. First classically monastic orientated, the 'Little Brothers of Jesus', as the order called itself, decided to go into the working sphere, and there to connect active and contemplative life. {18}

Independently of the establishment of the Little Brothers of Jesus the woman's congregation of the Little Sisters of Jesus was founded by Madeleine Hutin (1898-1989). This order, which was recognized 1947 in France, follows likewise the rule of Charles de Foucauld. The Sisters live and work 'in the world', preferentially in the workers' milieu and among the poor and people on the

margins. They live on the wages of their labour, and live not in a nunnery, but in flats let for rent in marginal quarters. {19}

But lay women too looked in those years for ways to live at the side of the poor. So, for example, the Christian social worker Madleine Delbr el (1904-1964), who at the age of twenty-nine moved decidedly to the communist dominated industry and worker city Ivry, to live there with a group of women in accordance with the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. She was in contact with Jaques Loew, and influenced likewise the 'Mission de France'. During the conflicts about the worker priests she tried to help mediating. Likewise, she was informally involved in the preparations of the Second Vatican Council. A testimony of her experiences as Christian is in her book 'Ville marxiste, terre de mission'. {20}

1.2.5. The Mission de Paris

For the development of the French worker priest movement the 'Mission de Paris' plays a central role. Its emergence is to be seen in direct connection with the sociological investigation of the two JOC chaplains Henri Godin and Yvan Daniel. In their study 'La France, pays de mission?' they came to the result that the French workers live in total separation from the church. They saw the only possibility of the workers' re-Christianization in the working of especially trained priests within the worker milieu, where then worker parishes develop, which differ from the otherwise usual middle-class parish structures - and correspond to the needs of the workers. {21}

The Paris Cardinal Emmanuel Suhard was impressed by the results of that investigation and became from now on the promoter of the efforts to overcome the gap between church and workers. He created the 'Mission de Paris', whose priests vowed to devote themselves completely to the Christianization of the working class. At the beginning a group of fifteen secular and regular priests, to whom also two laywomen belonged, established two communities in Paris worker quarters. In vain they tried to form there small Christian communities. The missionaries had to realize that it was not sufficient to shift only the centre of life from a parish into a worker quarter. {22}

In this time it came to first sceptical and hesitating approaches to the communists, who were at that time quite influential among the French workers, and shaped also the most important trade union C.G.T.. Initial coincidental contacts led to the active participation of priests within the by communists dominated self-help groups in the 'quartier'. In the context of this co-operation both sides gave gradually up their mutual prejudices.

1.3. The High Phase of the French Worker Priest Movement

The activity of the 'Mission de Paris' was expanded soon beyond the capital: From autumn 1944 also in other French industrial cities so-called ' equipes' of worker priests came into existence, so that at the beginning of the fifties in the entire country approximately hundred worker priests were active. {23}

It came to a shift of the worker priests' centre of life: When at the beginning the 'quartier' was the place of action, the insight was generally accepted then that the factory work was actually the centre of the workers' life. The priests took up therefore even manual work and extended so their 'pr esence' into the factories. By direct experiencing the conditions of work, and the still more intensive contact with the communist trade unionists the mutual confidence grew. In this phase many priests decided to enter into the communist C.G.T., since it was according to their opinion the only trade union which actually engaged for the workers. The unionist activities were very

important for many worker priests, in order to integrate themselves fully into the worker milieu, and to develop their class-consciousness. {24}

Some worker priests shouldered prominent positions in the trade union, which caused numerous tensions with the Catholic Action, conservative church circles, and not least with the Christian trade unions. {25} So for example worker priests and Christian workers criticized the Catholic trade union C.F.T.C publicly, since it had betrayed the interests of the workers in the strike in Limoges: "As militant workers we explain expressly that the C.F.T.C. of Limoges betrayed the interests of the workers and Christians, and denounce the unfaithfulness of this unionist and political centre." {26}

Apart from the participation in strikes numerous worker priests engaged in the 'Mouvement de la paix', a reservoir of former resistance fighters, pacifists and left. The 'Mouvement' stood up particularly for the end of the war in Indochina and the abolishment of nuclear weapons, and turned explicitly against the NATO. Both, with their union commitment and with the political activities in connection with the peace movement the worker priests were often in the centre of public interest. When 1952 two worker priests were arrested at a peace demonstration, it came to public scandals.

An enormous change had taken place: The worker priests had lined up themselves in order to live in a non-Christian worker milieu, to form Christian cells, and to do missionary work. Already in this early phase it came to approaches of priests to communists and trade unions. The mutually existing prejudices were gradually removed. Subsequently, the priests entered into the factory work and continued to assimilate themselves to the workers. They acculturated themselves into the worker milieu and found there those values which they wanted to bring them actually from the outside. Finally, the "incarnation" into the worker milieu went so far that the worker priests engaged in the trade unions and rubbed shoulders with the communists. When in the beginnings the mission was placed into the foreground yet, then now the thoughts of 'présence' and solidarity had won in weight. The worker priests took part not only in the struggle for work, but beyond that they had also entered into the combat organizations and communist trade unions.

1.4. The Conflicts around the Worker Priests

The Roman Curia had since the middle of the forties doubts against the new ways, which the French church went with the experiment of the worker priests. {27} There were particularly two aspects, against which the Vatican had strong doubts: the image of priesthood and the proximity to communism. In Rome one asked the question whether factory work was compatible with priestly life at all. One was afraid, not only to endanger by it the health but also the moral and religious life of the priests. The priests run the risk not to be able to fulfil their daily prayer and the morning celebration of mass any longer. Likewise Rome doubted whether the factory work was at all suitable to achieve the intended goals. {28}

The doubts because of communism are to be seen on the background of the ideological debates of the war and post-war period as well as of the pronounced church anticommunism of those years. Exemplary the encyclical letter 'Quadragesimo Anno' (1931) of Pope Pius XI is mentioned here, in which communism was condemned sharply because of its readiness for open violence and class warfare, its hostility against property, and its atheistic and anti-church positions. Also, socialism is to be rejected in principle, since it does not give up the positions criticized at communism, but does only lessen them. To the question of the compatibility of Christian and socialist commitments Pius XI explained:

"To satisfy these interrogators in accordance with our paternal pastoral care we declare: Socialism, no matter if as teachings, as historical fact or as movement, even when it has

given in the mentioned topics room to truth and justice, will always remain incompatible with the doctrine of the Catholic church - it must stop to be socialism: the contrast between socialist and Christian view of society is unbridgeable." {29}

He stressed that a view of society is the basis for socialism, "which is contrary to the genuine Christian view. Religious socialism, Christian socialism are contradictions as such; it is impossible to be at the same time a good Catholic and a real socialist." {30}

1.5. 'De-facto' Prohibition of the Worker Priests (1954)

Before this mental and church-political background the conflicts are to be seen, which developed around the question of the worker priests: The more the worker priests publicly engaged, and became active with strikes and political demonstrations, the more they had to submit to the reproach to be no longer "correct" priests, but rather political activists. At the latest after the public controversies about the 1952 at a peace demonstration arrested priests Rome had decided to stop the experiment of the worker priests.

To clarify open questions, the three cardinals Felin, Gerlier and Liénart travelled 1953 to discussions with the Pope, the Congregation for Seminaries, and the Holy Office to Rome. After their return the French bishops published in November 1953 a declaration to the question of the worker priests:

"After ten-year existence the experiment of the worker priests [...] in its present form cannot be upheld. But in the concern to keep the contact which has been established between the church and world of labour, the church sees it gladly, if priests, who gave sufficient proofs of their qualification, maintain a priestly apostolate in the middle of the worker milieu. But the church wants:

1. that they are expressly selected by their bishop;
2. that they get a special solid training both regarding the doctrine and the spiritual guidance;
3. that they take over manual work only for a limited time, so that they are able to fulfil all duties given by their priesthood;
4. that they not undertake lay posts, by which they could be entrusted with unionist or other responsibilities which are to leave to laymen and laywomen;
5. that they do not live isolated but are attached to a priest community or a parish, and give a certain contribution to the life of the parish." {31}

As reaction to these developments the Jesuits withdrew at the end of 1953 there were at that time seven worker priests. The Dominicans followed this example later. The break of the orders with the idea of worker priesthood was seen as signpost. {32}

Early in 1954 the French bishops published a declaration in which they emphasized again that the priestly way of life did not agree with that of workers. In a separate letter to each worker priest the further activity of the worker priests was strictly regimented. They should withdraw from all lay offices, only three hours were allowed as daily work time, they should also give up their membership in trade unions, works councils, and other worker organizations. In case of offence one threatened with church-legal consequences. The worker priests should realize these instructions by March 1954. {33} Especially the three hours limit of the daily work was de facto the end of operational work, since there were full time workers in the factories only.

Strong contradiction arose among the worker priests. They argued that one could not live authentically as worker, without taking part in the workers' movement, political activities, and the trade union work. {34} Seventy-three worker priests signed a manifesto, in which they turned against the decision of the bishops. The newspaper 'Le Monde' published the declaration in February 1954. There it said among other things:

"This decision relies on religious motives. We do not believe however that our worker life prevented us ever from remaining faithful to our faith and our priesthood. We do not see, how one can - in the name of the gospel - forbid priests to participate in the living conditions of millions of suppressed people, and to show solidarity with their fights." {35}

Thus the commitment of the worker priests was for the time being ended in March 1954. About half of the worker priests followed the instructions of the church hierarchy and left the factories hoping that the successor of Pope Pius XII would permit the factory work again. The other half opposed, remained with the factory work, and took on the church sanctions. By dispensations and very wide interpretations of the papal instructions some bishops tried to leave their worker priests further in the factory work. {36}

The conflicts about the worker priests had a large public effect. Numerous intellectuals declared their solidarity with the worker priests and their object. {37} A set of publications appeared in the track of these conflicts: Oscar Arnal counted twelve novels about the worker priests, which had appeared up to the middle of the sixties. Up to the end of the sixties 78 writings of or about worker priests were published. {38} It is amazing which public effect the conflicts about the about hundred worker priests had in a country, in which about 40.000 secular and 8.000 regular priests worked. The cause is to be seen probably in the fact that together with the conflicts about the worker priests still different, important topics were implicitly negotiated.

Ulrich Peter commentates appropriately: "It did not only concern the handful of priests. At and on them the conflict raved about the fundamental role of the church. In retrospect it appears like the prelude of the Vatican's fight under the Polish Pope against the 'Liberation Theology'." {39}

Those approximately fifty worker priests, who - partly with approval of their bishops - opposed the disciplinary punishment, took different life ways. But for all of them these events meant a personal tragedy. They had made their life option and had gotten involved completely in the life as workers and priests. The up to then unknown question arose for them, whether they should follow their conviction and the gospel or the church leaders. Those who opposed the church instructions had often not the impression that they had turned away from the church, but rather that the church had turned away from them. Some let transfer themselves back into the status of layman and married, others broke totally with the church. Many remained further unionized and politically active and held loose contacts to others 'insoumis', hence to worker priests who had opposed the church instructions. {40}

1.6. The Theologically Justified Prohibition (1959)

The continuous tensions about the prohibition of the worker priest movement, the polarization of the opinions in church and public, and not least the fighting back worker priests ensured that the topic remained further current in France. Also, the problem of the church presence within the worker milieu was still open. Following the work of the 'Mission de France' the French bishops had established in March 1957 an Apostolate for Work, which should coordinate above all the activities of the JOC and other lay/wo/man federations, but in which also priests – in accordance with the

conditions of the Vatican did manual work for maximal three hours daily. {41} To make clear the demarcation to the 'prêtres ouvriers', one was to speak in this connection of 'prêtres au travail'.

On an attendance in the year 1959 the archbishop from Paris, Cardinal Feltin, got a special audience with Pope Johannes XXIII, where he submitted a report about the situation of the worker mission in France. Likewise he asked on this occasion to permit in special cases worker priests, who worked full time in the factory, as it was usual before 1954. The letter addressed at Feltin, in which Cardinal Pizzardo, Secretary of the Holy Office, answered the request in the negative, should be treated actually confidentially, but by indiscretion it was brought into the open and published by newspapers. {42} Among other things it reads:

"The Holy See holds that it is not essential to the apostolate in the worker milieu to send priests as workers there, and that it is not possible to sacrifice the handed down view of priesthood for this purpose [...].

The priest is ordained essentially for the practice of sacral functions: to offer God the holy Eucharist and the public prayer of the church, to minister the sacraments to the faithful, and to preach the word of God [...]

He gives this testimony [of Christ's resurrection] above all by preaching the word, and not by manual working among factory hands, as if they were his peers.

What is more, the Holy See holds that working in a factory or on a building site is incompatible with the priestly life and its obligations. On working days it would be actually almost impossible for the priest to fulfill all the prayer obligations which the church imposed upon him for each day: Celebration of the holy mass, complete breviary prayer, meditation, attendance of Holy of Holiest, and rosary." {43}

The Holy Office suggested for these and other reasons in this letter to replace the working priests gradually by laymen who were members of secular institutes. With this letter, approved by the Pope, the manual work was finally forbidden with theological arguments.

2. Developments after the Prohibition of the Worker Priests

2.1. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) - New Perspectives

When the preparations for the Second Vatican Council began, the worker priests saw a chance to bring their request again into the discussion, and decided to be present in the surroundings of the council. Three French and two Belgian Council Fathers issued the compellingly necessary invitation letters, so that always two worker priests were in Rome during the three sessions of the council. Although they did not hold official advisor status, they succeeded in lobbying in the surroundings of the council, and to engage in conversations with council fathers and theologians, and so to give impulses to discussions. Likewise, they got an audience with Pope John XXIII, and in numerous institutions of the Roman church leadership. {44}

In this situation of the church opening to the world and the break with doctrinaire narrowness, among other things also the image of priesthood was determined anew. Here the worker priests were looked for interlocutors. It is not least owed to their lobbying and to the efforts of well-meaning bishops and council theologians (as Yves Congar or Marie Dominique Chenu) that in the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests "Presbyterorum Ordinis" (1965) the following passage is found:

"Despite of their various offices, they [the priests] offer to man the one priestly service. All are sent to work together on the same work, whether they work now as minister in a parish or in role that goes beyond the parish, whether they dedicate themselves to science or have a teaching profession, whether they - where this appears advisable by the approval of responsible authority - work even manually and share so even the lot of the workers or perform other apostolic tasks or works aiming at the apostolate." {45}

The council opened so again the possibility to connect the priestly life with the life in the world of labour, which had been blocked eleven years ago under other church and doctrinaire conditions.

2.2. The Revival of the Worker Priest Movement

Numerous French priests made use of the by the council enabled continuation of the mission of the worker priests: When 1965 the council were solemnly ended, fifteen priests took up the work in the factory, in the years 1968 to 1970 followed 124 further priests, and in the period of 1971 to 1974 further 104. {46} In the year 1979, twenty years after the prohibition by the Holy Office, in France 950 worker priests were active in different ranges of production. {47} In the critical point of the conflict about the French worker priests in the middle of the fifties their number was about hundred.

Probably by the changed church doctrinaire and world-political situation, but also due to the experiences of the first generation of worker priests, the 'new' worker priests were less in the light of the public interest. 'Leur silence est parole', so the title which the worker priest Jean Risse gave his autobiographic book, expresses the strategy of the worker priests well: They tried 'ilencieux, mais très presents' to work in their factories and jobs as workers among workers.

In France different, partially parallel, partially competitive structures developed. Numerous regional 'équipes' and a 'Équipe National de Prêtres-Ouvriers' (ENPO) exist. A secretary, who manages the national organisation, is elected by the regional groups. On the level of the official church the ENPO cooperates with the episcopal commission for the mission in the worker world. The ENPO publishes since 1972 the monthly magazine 'Courrier P.O.', an important communication and information forum. {48}

After the readmission of the worker priests went into the factories also in other European countries. In Belgium there had been worker priests already before the conflicts, but after the council their number increased again, and rose to approx. fifty worker priests in the year 1983. {49}

In Italy 1955 Carlo Carnevalis already went as the first priest into a factory. {50} Between 1966 and 1972 he cared for about twenty seminarists from Torino and Venice, who suspended their study and their seminar training for two to three years, lived outside of the seminary, and worked in factories. {51} In the year 1998 there were in Italy about 250 worker priests. Likewise smaller groups of worker priests developed in Spain and Germany. {52}

2.3. Worker Brothers and Sisters in Germany

The first priests began end of the sixties with the factory work in Germany. It concerned chaplains of many years of the CAJ (Christliche Arbeiter Jugend, German branch of the JOC) and priests from the orders of the Dominicans, Franciscans and Oblates. {53} In the year 1973 the 'Conference of Worker Priests in German-speaking Countries' which originated in the first meeting of seven German speaking worker priests 1972 in a monastery of the Oblates in Mainz. In the year 1983 the circle opened also for other church socialized people, like lay/wo/man theologians, religious sisters (above all Little Sisters of Jesus), and pastoral / lady / assistants, who - after the model of the worker priests - live not on church wages, but on the wages of their own manual work. {54}

This circle of Workers' Brothers and Sisters, as they call themselves, meets since 1972 usually twice per year - at first in Mainz, since 1988 in Ilbenstadt near Frankfurt. In the German-speaking countries today approximately fifty persons belong to this circle, from whom in each case about two thirds come to the half-yearly meetings. These meetings, in which since 1978 also regularly worker priests from France and Great Britain take part, have usually a topical focus. In the first years it concerned predominantly the mutual becoming acquainted with each other, the self-understanding as a worker priest, and the question: who belongs to the circle of the worker priests. Later topical questions moved into the foreground: Reflections about the personal background of each participant, and the experiences in the worker world; the topic of unemployment and of the economic system; the question of the importance of personal faith, political commitment, of the political co-operation partners. Likewise it concerned the experiences made by the worker brothers and sisters at the margin of the society, and the social and political conflicts which develop from there. Later increasingly topics of international relevance were treated, after 1989 also the question about the consequences of the alleged victory of capitalism. {55}

Due to the entrance of many into retirement in the past years a shift happened with regard to the topics: When in former times experiences of the worker's everyday life were the dominating topic, then now the experiences in the retirement and the commitment in social movements and quarter initiatives played more and more an important role.

Particularly after the breakdown of communism the Ilbenstadt Workers' Brothers and Sisters strove to take up contacts to worker priests from the former GDR and from the countries of the Eastern Bloc, in which there were numerous priests who worked partly voluntarily, partly of necessity incognito in factories. {56}

The German speaking Workers' Brothers and Sisters collective is not integrated into church structures. Well, there are good relations to individual church appointed industrial chaplains, but the official contacts to the German Bishop Conference remained weak.

3. Tendencies

Finally, now eight observations and tendencies are to be pointed out, which characterize the development of the worker priest movement from its beginnings till today.

'Quantitative expansion'

Like already in other place suggested, the prohibition of the worker priests in the fifties meant quantitatively only the beginning of the movement. Since the readmission of the worker priests 1965 their number rose to about 1.000. The about hundred worker priests, who were at its first blossom in France, represented, as it were, the germ-cell of today's movement.

'Aging of the Movement'

Numerous worker priests have meanwhile retired. The French daily paper 'La Croix' published the results of an inquiry among the at present 517 French worker priests. From the 239 worker priests who answered the questionnaires, 84.5% were older than 60, only 1.7% were younger than 51. The part of pensioners among the French worker priests is at 82%. {57} In other countries the age structure is similar. As retirement belongs to the biography of a worker, so it belongs also to that of a worker priest. It is true, he ends his gainful employment, but as recipient of a pension he continues to live and work among pensioners and workers. Many of these retired persons engage further in

trade unions and organizations, in which they were active already before. Hence the activities of the worker priests end not with the ending of their gainful employment.

With this aging the problem is connected that only few young people decide for a life as worker priests. From the insight that the concept of the worker priests is unknown today to many students of theology, some members of the German Workers' Brothers and Sisters collective offer for some time training courses at theological faculties.

'Differentiation of the Fields of Activity'

While the first worker priests were active in the factories predominantly, then the activity spectrum extended today. When in the fifties above all the factory hands were underprivileged and lived on the margins of society, today the margin of society changed. The worker priests followed them and work today beside in factories in different cheap wage sectors, low service ranges like gastronomy and building cleaning, retail trade, driver or taxi driver, or as day labourer and temporary worker. Often it is less a free-willed decision to accept limited and precarious conditions of employment. Rather it becomes in the present economic situation increasingly difficult for the worker priests to find as unskilled workers an employment in large-scale enterprises. {58}

'Confessional Opening'

The worker priest movement developed within the Catholic church of France. But in the past decades also priests, ministers and theologians of other denominations and churches followed the example of the French worker priests and pursued the manual work in order to live their being a Christian in the context of an industrial consumer society which is predominantly shaped by the economic winner perspective. {59}

'Opening for lay/wo/men'

Even if among the first members of the 'Mission de Paris' were two laywomen, the worker priests of the first generation were solely men, since the priesthood is reserved according to Catholic understanding to men only. By the confessional opening also /lady/ ministers came into the circle of the Workers' Brothers and Sisters. Likewise women's congregations as for example the Little Sisters of Jesus see to a stronger female presence among the Worker's Brothers and Sisters. That now also lay/wo/man theologians and women pursue the factory work, has its cause in the fact that the study of theology was done until few decades ago predominantly by candidates for the priesthood, i.e. men, but hardly by lay/wo/men.

'Change with the Political Actions'

Many of the French worker priests organized themselves after initial fears of contact in the trade unions and engaged in the works councils and in the peace movement. Also today numerous Workers' Brothers and Sisters are still union members, representatives, and members of works councils. The working conditions are also still today a field of politics to which many worker priests devote themselves.

To this 'classical' field numerous other topic fields were added in the course of the time, in which individual Workers' Brothers and Sisters engage: international groups of solidarity, campaigns for debts to be written off, human rights, asylum politics, international economic system, support of political prisoners etc.. There today's Workers' Brothers and Sisters, who go decidedly to the differentiated margin of the society, make experiences which are then theologically reflected, and which finally result in political commitment.

The widening of the topical spectrum was also accompanied by a diversification of the political action and co-operation partners: Beside the trade unions and political parties different non-government organizations and movements, such as Attac, Amnesty International, 'Initiative Ordensleute für den Frieden' (Initiative of Religious for Peace) {60}, 'Ordensleute gegen Ausgrenzung' (Religious Against Expulsion), 'Initiative Kirche von Unten' (Initiative 'Grass Roots'-Church), international trade union federations or different third world and solidarity initiatives play an important role.

'Internationalization'

An internationalization of the worker priest movement took place in several respects: On the one hand other priests followed the example of the French worker priests in several countries: First in Belgium, then in Spain, Italy, England, and Germany. But also in non-European countries as for example starting from 1973 in Chile {61}, Colombia, Togo, the Ivory Coast, Sri Lanka etc..

On the other hand the internationalization of the worker priest movement becomes apparent also in an increasing international cross-linking. This is based on the one hand on personal contacts of worker priests/brothers and sisters with colleagues in other countries. Some worker priests studied or worked in countries of the south, and hold further contact to team-mates, theologians and other activists there. {62} But also on the collective level the exchange was further interlaced: Starting from the late seventies for example foreign delegations took part in the national meetings of the French worker priests. {63}

Since the early nineties structures of international exchange developed in the form of annual Whitsun meetings, in which worker priests from different European countries take part. In the year 2001 the first world meeting of the worker priests took place at Whitsuntide in Strasbourg, in which participants from twenty countries and four continents - among them also four bishops - took part. {64}

Further the internationalization is reflected in the topics, to which the worker priests devote themselves in their unionized, political and social commitment. They face here, so to speak, the challenges of the modern global world economy, and set against it first attempts of a globalization from the "grass roots". In this connection also international trade union connections and trans-national works council work play an important role.

'Newer Theological and Spiritual Foundations'

The first worker priests, who went into the factories, were on the one hand inspired by the mission thought, on the other hand from the friendship to and the solidarity with their team-mates. Concrete practice had absolute priority, theological reflection was subordinate.

In this connection is to be considered also that the first worker priests could not fall back yet to such rich instruments of philosophical and theological reflection. Only since 'Rerum Novarum', the first social encyclical letter from 1891, topics such as work and capital, struggle for work, fair wages etc. became the subject of church, social-ethical and theological reflection. Today's Workers' Brothers and Sisters have also substantially more differentiated and developed reflection instruments at their disposal. {65}

An important role has here the in Latin America developed Liberation Theology, which sees itself as theological reflection on the preceding practice of liberation, e.g. from the so-called "structures of sin" or social injustices. Interestingly enough Liberation Theology was for its part affected strongly by the church developments in France and Belgium during the forties and fifties. The methodical

three-step "seeing - judgements - acting", introduced by Joseph Cardijn into the JOC, was refined and more strongly theorized by the Brazilian Clodovis Boff, and became so the substantial epistemological instrument of Liberation Theology. {66} By the reception of Liberation Theology in Europe these aspects became a leading function for the actions and realization of numerous European theologians. The worker priest Thomas Schmidt notices to this: "At least in my biography the impulses of the French church and its theologians came not directly across the Rhine, but took the detour over the church and the Liberation Theology of Latin America." {67}

Likewise the liberation-theological program of the "option for the poor" plays an important role. The worker priests try to make fruitful for the Central European context the Latin American practice and reflection on this topic.

The (theological) reflection is done in today's understanding of the worker priests as service to the practice:

"Theological thinking should be bound thereby on the one hand to a clear social place, and be understood on the other hand as subsequent step to previous practice. The theologian is organically connected with the practice of liberation and tries also by his subordinate, theoretical work to further this practice." {68}

A worker priest of the first generation would probably hardly have understood his function and practice in this way.

Beside the Biblical impulses, the social-ethical and moral valuation criteria and the reflection instruments which can be made usable from Liberation Theology, today also still different philosophical and theoretical concepts are consulted for reflection. Also here it concerns possibilities which the first worker priests in this kind had not at their disposal yet.

Also which concerns the spiritual wording of the operational practice, today's worker brothers and sisters can draw from richer sources: Exemplary mentioned are here only the writings which go back to the surroundings and the successors of Charles de Foucauld, Madelaine Delbr el, or the spiritual impulses from the Liberation Theology, as those from Gustavo the Gutierrez, Ernesto Cardenal or Pedro Casald liga etc..

Thus for instance in Berlin members of religious orders offer each year ten days' retreats in different cities. The participants visit individually places where they - due to their life history feel moved internally. These places are often meeting places of drug addicts, unemployed persons in the labour exchange, praying people in mosques, prisoners behind iron bars. If they leave off their fears and recognize the unity with (their) brothers and sisters there, these places become "holy places" of God's incarnation, where God will speak to them similarly as to Moses before the burning thorn shrubs (Ex 3).{69}

Link to: 'Public Con-Spiration for the Poor' <http://www.con-spiration.de/>

Notes

{1} At this place I would like to thank quite cordially Little Sister Marlene, Albert Koolen, Thomas Schmidt, Fritz Stahl, and George Wolter for the numerous discussions, the provided documents, and the critical examination of the manuscript.

{2} Siefer 1993: 928.

{3} Christ in der Gegenwart, No. 31/2001: 258, emphasized in the original.

{4} 'To the state of research': There are many publications which are concerned with the topic of the worker priests up to the prohibition of the movement 1954. The large majority of these publications has however a strongly testimonial character. Often it concerns testimonies of worker priests, who report and reflect in these books and smaller contributions their experiences. Further it is noticeable that above all in France in the past years a number of these testimonial writings appeared which has certainly to do with the biographies of many worker priests, who - now in retirement - have time to fix their experiences in writing. Among these rather testimonial publications rank among other things: Anglade 2001, Lémonon 2000, Olhagaray 1999.

Testimonies about the time after the prohibition are among others Brückmann/Jacob 1996 and 2004, Dupuy 2000, Hurrett/Combe 1999, Lehmann 1992, Viet Depaule 2002.

Among the rather systematizing writings rank Arnal 1979 and 1984, Cole-Arnal 1986 and 1997, Dingler 1966, Flower 1967, Koolen 2002, Koolen/Straßner 2004, Mantle 2000, Peter 2004, Poterie/Jeusselin 2001, Siefer 1960, and Suaud/Viet Depaule 2004. Leprieur 1989 submitted a very extent and highly detailed work, which illustrates above all the events from the perspective of the Dominicans. There are to be found few investigations only which argue with theological foundations, so for example Erlander 1991, Koolen 2002, and Schmidt 2002. Sources, chronologies and time documents are among other things with Worker Priest 1957, Documentation 1992, Godin/Daniel 1946, Godin/Michel 1950, Viet Depaule 2002, and within the (church) periodicals of those years.

There is further a large number of 'grey literature', often short testimonial reports, newspaper articles, or position papers. A bibliography in more detail can be got on request from the author.

The first phase of the worker priest movement until 1954 is quite comprehensively worked on in the research literature. Productive would surely be the systematizing investigation of the autobiographies of worker priests, existing in increasing number. Desiderata of research are further the development of the worker priest movement after the prohibition and the readmission. Likewise the investigation of the increasing international cross-linking - in the sense of globalization from the "grass roots" - represents a new research field. A further desideratum is the investigation of the theological and spiritual foundations of the worker priest existence, and the integration of different theological and philosophical ways of thinking into the worker priests' reflection on practice.

{5} Cf. Flower 1967: 183f. and Duriez 2003.

{6} Cf. to the importance of JOC Cole-Arnal 1997: 510f. Und Godin/Michel 1950: 179.

{7} Cf. Siefer 1960: 51.

{8} Cf. Peter 2004: 32f. and Arbeiterpriester 1957: XIII.

{9} German edition: Loew 1960.

{10} Cf. Poterie/Jeusselin 2001: 75ff.

{11} Cf. Siefer 1960: 54.

{12} An important testimony from that time is the diary of the Jesuit Father Henri Perrin (Perrin 1956). These recordings from the years 1943 and 1944 open as well views into the situation of the French workers and priests in German camps as also into his ideas, motivation, and spirituality. Perrin was also the only of the twenty five priests, who was active as worker priests after the return to France (see Flagothier 1998: 10).

{13} Perrin 1956: 41f.

{14} Perrin 1956: 120.

{15} Perrin 1956: 313.

{16} Herder Korrespondenz, volume 8/3, December 1953, p. 155.

{17} Cf. also Internet <http://www.charlesdefoucauld.org> [03.03.04].

{18} Cf. Voillaume 1998.

{19} see to the Little Sister Madleine and the order of the Little Sisters of Jesus Daiker 1999 and 1992.

{20} German Translation Delbrêl 1975. About life and work of Delbrêl see Schleinzer 2001 and Fuchs 1995.

{21} Cf. Godin/Daniel 1943, a shortened German version is in Godin/Michel 1950: 59 241; cf. also Arbeiterpriester 1957: 5.

{22} Cf. Viet-Depaule 2002: 6ff.

{23} Cf. Arnal 1984: 531f. and Siefer 1960: 295. Leprieur 1989: 681 707 listed approx. 180 short biographies of the first worker priests as well as of other important persons in connection with the worker priest movement.

{24} Cf. about the approach of worker priests and the communist party Arnal 1984: 534 544.

{25} Cf. Herder Korrespondenz volume 8/2, November 1953, p. 89.

{26} cited from Arbeiterpriester 1957: 37.

{27} a highly detailed, chronological representation of the conflict is in Arbeiterpriester 1957: 1-56, numerous documents are edited in Viet Depaule 2002: 287-353.

{28} Cf. Arbeiterpriester 1957: 14ff. and 22. A summary of the theological debate about the compatibility of priesthood and factory work is found with Famà 1998: 26ff.

{29} Cf. Pius XI, Quadragesimo Anno (1931), No. 111 128, quotation No. 117, in: Katholische Arbeitnehmer Bewegung 1982: 134.

{30} Pius XI, Quadragesimo Anno (1931), No. 120, in: Katholische Arbeitnehmer Bewegung 1982: 135.

{31} Text in German translation in Herder-Korrespondenz volume 8/2, November 1953, p. 110.

{32} Cf. Leprieur 1989: 199 205.

{33} The declaration as well as the letter to the worker priests are in Herder-Korrespondenz volume 8/6, March 1954, p. 259ff. and in Arbeiterpriester 1957: 191 197.

{34} Cf. Arnal 1984 : 550.

{35} The text is in German translation in Herder-Korrespondenz volume 8/6, March 1954, p. 262.

{36} Cf. Peter 2004 : 38f.

{37} Cf. Leprieur 1989: 142 150.

{38} Cf. Arnal 1984: 529f.

{39} Peter 2004: 37.

{40} see for this the testimonies and portraits in Viet-Depaule 2002.

{41} Cf. Poterie/Jeusselin 2001: 136 139.

{42} A German translation of the letters is published in Herder-Korrespondenz volume 14/2, November 1959, p. 76ff..

{43} Herder-Korrespondenz volume 14/2, November 1959, p. 76f.

{44} Cf. Famà 1998a and Poterie/Jeusselin 2001: 139ff.

{45} Second Vatican Council: Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests "/Presbyterorum ordinis/", No. 8, in: Rahner/Vorgrimmler 2000: 575.

{46} Cf. Poterie/Jeusselin 2001: 280.

{47} Cf. Poterie/Jeusselin 2001: 160.

{48} According to an information of Guy Augin, secretary of the ENPO, the /Courrier P.O/ appears at present in an edition of approx. 1.200 copies, from which about 100 are taken in by subscribers of European and 30 of non-European countries. Still three further worker priest magazines exist in Europe: In Italy the magazines 'Pretioperai' and 'Itinerari', in Great Britain the Anglican magazine 'Minister-at-Work'. Discussion forums are also in the InterNet under <http://pero.wanadoo.fr/pretres.ouviers/> [06.04.04].

{49} Cf. to Belgium Flagothier 1998: 11f. and 14 17.

{50} Cf. to Italy Fama 1994.

{51} Cf. Poterie/Jeusselin 2001: 168 173.

{52} Cf. to Spain Pérez 2003.

{53} Cf. to the German speaking Workers' Sisters and Brothers Stahl 1994 and Dokumentation 1992.

{54} Cf. Peter 2004: 38f.

{55} about the meetings and treated topics Dokumentation 1992: 63ff.

{56} Cf. Koolen 2002: 143; to the worker ministers in the GDR see the contributions in Brückmann/Jacob 1996 and 2004.

{57} Cf. La Croix 21./22. février 2004: 3.

{58} Cf. to this for instance the contributions in Dokumentation 1992.

{59} See for example the witnesses of Evangelical worker / lady / ministers in Brückmann/Jacob 1996 and 2004. For Anglican worker priests see Erlander 1991, Mantel 2000 and Johnson 1998.

{60} Cf. to this Böckermann 2002 and Internet <http://www.people.freenet.de/IOF/home.html> [03.03.04].

{61} Cf. to worker priests in Chile Dupuy 2000, Aldunate 2000.

{62} Cf. e.g. Schmidt 2002 and Koolen 2002a.

{63} Cf. Poterie/Jeusselin 2001: 164

{64} Cf. Publik Forum 12/2001 vom 29.06.01, S. 41.

{65} Cf. e.g. Koolen/Straßner 2004.

{66} Cf. Boff 1995.

{67} Schmidt 2002: 258.

{68} Schmidt 2002: 257.

{69} Street Retreats <http://www.con-spiration.de/exerzitien.html>