

Mission de France: 'Cause célèbre'

Deirdre Palk, Auxerre, February 2004

Two years ago, I retired from work in England and came to live in France - in Auxerre (only if you are football crazy will the name of this lovely little city in Burgundy, about 150 kilometres from Paris, mean anything to you). The purpose of this great change in my life was to live an experiment - is it possible to cope with, even enjoy, the challenge of living in another language, another culture and particularly in another social and administrative system? (It will be a while yet before I can answer the question!)

Perhaps it was more than mere chance that brought us to Auxerre, a few kilometres from Pontigny, the spiritual home of the Mission de France, and to a diocese where the bishop (Archbishop of Sens-Auxerre), Georges Gilson, is the 'prelat', or responsible bishop, of the Mission - a man deeply committed to this way of 'being Church' - who even knows about UK MSEs! So, the reprint of John Mantle's article 'Worker Priests - Lost Cause or Cause Célèbre?' in the MAW Journal no. 88 caused me to reflect on what I have understood of the work of the Mission de France since I have been living here.

I can't answer the question of Mantle's article title. As with my own personal questions, it will take time to work out. France is such a different country from the countries of the UK, politically, culturally, and especially religiously. The separation of church and state enshrined in the French constitution is an ever present, constantly discussed marker, which is difficult to grasp and to assess. The primacy of 'laicity' is refreshing, but extremely challenging. It is perhaps this heartfelt and seriously pursued concept of laicity which may mean that the model of the Mission de France is not appropriate for the UK, rather than the issues suggested by Ted Wickham in 1961 - time, particularly the emergence from the dark years of the 1940s and early 1950s, has altered the picture. However, the dynamism of the Mission is a phenomenon which is worth study, particularly by the Church of England.

This year, the Community of the Mission de France has decided on its 'cause célèbre': "1954-2004, 50 years of 'Priests at Work'". This struck me as strange. We know that the Mission de France seminary was set up in Lisieux in 1941 to train priests to be ready to 'break down the wall, separating the Church from the mass of the people and to give Christ back to all those who have lost him'. This they were to do by working in the factories and workshops of the country; some priests from Paris were also authorised to go and work in factories from 1943. But in 1953, Rome announced an imminent ban on worker priests, forced the seminary to close, and by 1st March 1954, all worker priests had to leave their factories. The following year, Rome forbade any priest from 'work', even part-time.

The Mission de France, however, sees 1954 as a new starting point in the story of the worker-priest, and one to be celebrated. It appears to be the point at which the way of being a missionary church changed. The political, social and economic life of France was changing, coming out of the dreadful aftermath of war. No longer were priests to be trained to go alone to industrial situations, where they were isolated and unsupported - the team was the essential ingredient. I believe it has been the team structure which has allowed the Mission to grow and flourish particularly since the mid-1960s, and is the basis for its current dynamism. In 1954, the Mission obtained from the Pope a 'statute' which enabled it to open a seminary at Pontigny (in the buildings of a superb former Cistercian monastery) and here it started to train priests to work in teams in Algeria, where they publicly took up a position of support for the Algerian people in the struggle for independence from France - some priests of the mission still work in Algeria.

So, by 1965, the Mission was in a position to take advantage of the breath of hope offered at the end of the Second Vatican Council by Pope Paul VI who again authorised worker-priests. In 1980, the bishops of France gave accreditation to the Mission, requesting that priests worked in socially and culturally deprived areas of France, either at the request of a local diocese, or because they already worked professionally in a particular area and could join an existing team or be the focus of a new team.

1986 saw what appears to have been the crucial growth point - when the bishops ratified the creation of Mission teams which henceforth were to consist of priests, deacons and lay people, married or single; the permanent diaconate of the French Church was to be developed to play a crucial role in the Mission. Now, virtually all deacons and lay people of the Mission are in 'secular' work or are parents bringing up a family. At least half of the priests under the age of 60 are in a wide variety of paid 'secular' professions - the recent newsletters of the Mission have printed the stories of priests, deacons and lay people - and included a university teacher, a motorway construction worker, a nurse, other workers in the health services, a bus driver, various agricultural workers, people 'in computers', a chef, a ski instructor. All live in the areas where they have their mission, many living in the 'cités' - the densely populated post-1950 tower-blocks and 'barres' to be found on the edges of all largish French towns. Now there are more than 500 lay and ordained ministers of the Mission de France, grouped round at least one priest or deacon. Their commitment is to live and work among the poorest and the most deprived in this country. The Mission did not envisage a team without a priest; this now has been modified to say without a priest or a deacon. The priests of the French Church are of a very high average age, there are few new vocations to priesthood (though many more to the permanent diaconate - for good and bad reasons) and the Mission is in great need of younger priests who are already in professional secular employment.

About four years ago, the Mission - now called the Communauté de la Mission de France - created a support group - les Amis de la Communauté de la Mission de France - who engage to pray for the Mission and to give spiritual support, to support events and discussions held near us, and to give financial support for such things as renovating the house at Pontigny where young people often stay to engage in dialogue and discussion of current political and social issues. There are now well over 1,000 people in this network.

The feedback from the Mission itself gives cause for celebration - its work is impressive - but I would be unrealistic if I failed to ask the sort of questions that MSEs often ask. What is the standing of the Mission within the Catholic Church in France? What does the 'ordinary' churchgoer think of the Mission? How well is it understood and supported? I avoid answering my own questions, needing more immersion in the strangeness of life here! But, thus far I would say that, since the numbers trained for this mission are now quite significant, and since it is perfectly clear what the priests and deacons are being ordained to do, the French Church is investing a good deal in the work of the Mission. Its current bishop, Mgr Gilson, is a remarkable standard bearer - but, sadly, he is not far off retirement. What then? As for the ordinary church-goer, even here, close to where it started, our own bishop intimately involved, frequently ordaining men for the Mission: well, they don't seem to have heard of it! (And I am sure that it's not just my developing French with its English accent that draws the puzzled response!) No prayer is ever said at the Eucharist in the cathedral, no sermon preached that touches on 'work' or the work of the Mission, no contact point for the Mission is printed in the diocesan handbook. All familiar stuff.

If any reader is interested and can cope with a bit of French, I strongly recommend a visit to <http://www.mission-de-france.com> and a subscription to 'Lettre d'Information de la Communauté Mission de France' - particularly if you find experiential material to your liking. Every month in this 4 sheet A4 production there are brief stories from and interviews with members of the Mission teams, in which MSEs will find resonance with their own stories, as well as many significant differences which derive from a country and a Church with a different history, existing in a different culture.