

Worker Priests – Lost cause or cause celebre?

John Mantle

Last year Keith Holt drew my attention to an article that appeared in the December 1990 edition of the Newsletter (as this organ then was) by John Mantle, pointing out the significance of the Worker Priest movement and relating it to MSE. John's work resulted in his excellent study "Britain's First Worker Priests" (SCM Press, 2000; ISBN 0 334 02798 5). At the time of writing he was Tutor of the Canterbury School of Ministry and is currently Archbishops' Adviser for Episcopal Ministry for the Church of England. The observations made in here are still fresh and acutely relevant.

At the end of the worker-priest 'decade' and beyond, English texts were published which attempted to evaluate this innovation in ministryⁱ. At the time it had proved highly controversial: praised by some, castigated by others, it continued into the '60s and '70s to be viewed as something of a romantic ideal, well meant but relatively ineffective.

Ted Wickham, in his 'Appraisal' of Priests and Workers (1961), and from his involvement in the Sheffield Industrial Missionⁱⁱ, could not bring himself to advocate the same experiment in Britain. He saw a difference between the French and British working classes. Where the French worker had been traditionally anti-clerical and dominated by Communist organisations, the English worker, though intentionally separated from the Church, could nevertheless be sympathetic in attitude, just as others in a variety of social and cultural working roles might be equally well disposed towards Church and clergy. "... this compels us to question whether it is a relevant strategy of mission in the contemporary British scene, in a society with a considerable degree of social mobility, a steady diminution of the 'proletarian' group, and where a strong ideological sense of the working class is lacking.

But there were, and are, English worker-priests who had unilaterally disassociated themselves from formal ecclesiastical structures and had 'opted out' to work in industry. In their 'Rejoinder' (1965)ⁱⁱⁱ, they fiercely contested Wickham's arguments and advocated wholesale involvement and solidarity with the British working class. The introduction of the regulations that recognised non-stipendiary ministry in the Church of England (1970), whether the English worker-priests liked it or not, (and on the whole they saw it, rightly, as different), met with a mixed reception from those in and outside the various schemes which began to operate and which began to shift discussion. There were on the one hand (and no doubt still are) full-time parochial clergy who viewed NSMs, men and women, with suspicion, uncertain of their role and 'status'. On the other hand, some NSMs, aware of the many anomalies of their position, have felt frustrated and marginalised. It has not been a recipe for success. The lack of appreciation of what so many are left 'to do' has resulted in a slow but sizeable drift to stipendiary ministry; the final gesture demonstrating that presupposition that in full-time ministry resides 'true' ministry. It is relatively recently that recognition has grown of a difference between 'work centred ministry' and 'parochial centred ministry' for NSMs.

A publication appeared in 1986 which helps place the original worker-priests in a historical, pastoral and theological context and which could help all denominations, including the Church of England, to appreciate once again that non-stipendiary ministry, and certainly ministry in secular employment, does after all have an important and distinguished precursor.

Oscar Arnal, in 'Priests in Working Class Blue' (USA, 1986) has suggested that the original worker-priests were among the true fore-runners in that recent tradition of liberation theology exemplified in the pastoral struggles of South American priests. It was the Latin Americans at the Detroit Conference of 1975 who gave the theological perspective that was 'sorely needed'. 'They defined a consciousness which insisted that theology must speak out of a concrete reality, more specifically the reality of oppression. For them, the Gospel was a message of justice, hope and liberation for the poor, oppressed and marginalised of society.'

Arnal's contention is that the French worker-priests are among the fore-runners of those individuals and groups which contributed to what we now understand as liberation theology; it has its place

among early Methodism and those Protestant and Catholic 'social gospel' movements which have taken up the cause of the poor and marginalised as God's cause too. 'This is the overall historical and social context out of which the worker-priests emerged. They are one of the most unique responses of organised Christianity to the ravages of the industrial revolution. The worker-priests are a living example of liberation theology before the term was coined ... As such they are one paradigm, one significant model, of the gospel of liberation ... their story deserves to be told in its historical context, in its fullness and in its impact.'

Arnal then tells that story with a freshness that comes not only from an obvious personal enthusiasm, but from the many direct contacts he made during the late 1970s with worker-priests. He notes, in conclusion, that the movement 'returned with full force' since 1965 with worker-priests representing a 'full 3% of (France's) Catholic clergy' today.

What this contribution helps to do is rekindle the principle that it is, above all, the theological rationale that matters. The principle that it is those who are ordained and involved in secular work can bring a direct and incarnational response to the work place, 'catching up', as it were, with Christ, 'working in the world.' Recent attempts to distinguish between parish-based NSM and the 'work based' have been helped by Bishop Keith Rayner's particular theological reflection in ACCM's Occasional Paper No. 31 where he struggles with the theological including the old chestnut 'what difference does ordination make', coming down firmly on the side of the permanent diaconate as the better expression of Christian ministry in the work situation.

But a pressing issue in relation to Non-Stipendiary Ministry is not over the questions of 'diaconate or priesthood' (both of which may have a place in secular work) but in the establishment's lamentable record in recognising the particular value of Ministers in Secular Employment at all! Michael Ranken's article in the same ACCM paper looks at all kinds of ministry, with particular emphasis on work-focussed Ministry, or Ministry in Secular Employment, as a ministry whose purpose is missionary. Arguing for a theological emphasis that recognises a ministry outwith the bounds of ecclesiastical structures, he cannot help returning to the French worker-priests and the Mission de France as a kind of model and in favour of a fully recognised Ministry in Secular Employment. Michael Ranken would be the first to admit, of course, that 'secular employment' today, and certainly in American circles, must and in practice does involve a broader range of occupations.

If Ministry in Secular Employment is to mean 'work focussed ministry' then the Church of England, like the French, needs to establish its own 'non-territorial Diocese' and a Bishop whose exclusive role is a sign of the Church's commitment. Until then, no one, including the Bishop's Selectors, can blame potential ministerial candidates for feeling uncertain of a role about which the establishment itself is ambiguous and which, in practice, it has so far failed to support.

i Gregor Siefer, 'The Church and Industrial Society', London, 1964. John Petrie trans., 'The Worker Priests', London, 1956.

ii Ted Wickham, 'Appraisal', in ed. David Edwards, 'Priests and Workers', London, 1961.

iii John Rowe, 'Priests and Workers, a Rejoinder', London, 1965.