

THE DESTINY OF FRENCH CATHOLICISM<sup>1</sup>

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ONE may well wonder whether contemporary civilization does not create a type of man impervious to religious feeling.' This sentence from the preface to M. Dansette's book sets the general tone of the work, which is to show how this generalization applies in particular to France, and what the French Church is doing about it. Using the techniques of sociology applied to religious data, undertaken first by a professor of Canon Law, Gabriel Le Bras, M. Dansette paints a picture of a de-christianized France where there exists a Church in which old forms struggle against new ideals. Of course, Le Bras' four categories of Frenchmen do no more than register external observances—it is only by and large that they reflect a religious *mentality*, and the categories themselves are very crude: 'dissidents' who do not belong to the Church, 'seasonal conformers' (those who go to church for baptism, first communion, marriage and death), 'faithful' who make their Easter duties and go to Sunday Mass, 'pious' who do more than that. Again, practice itself is often deceptive; though very faithfully observed in the eighteenth century, no one would describe that as a century of faith: 'Un pratiquant peut être athée et un non pratiquant, croyant.'

The figures, even with the obvious reservations, are interesting. Three per cent of the French population is unbaptized; 3 per cent confessionally non-Catholic; of the 94 per cent baptized, 34.2 per cent make their Easter duties—but again this average figure is deceptive, since regional variations are so marked. The author then has recourse to Canon Boulard's map of religious practice in rural France, where three categories of regions are used: 'observance majoritaire' (45 per cent or more of adults make their Easter duties and go to Sunday Mass); 'observance minoritaire' (up to a maximum of 44 per cent or more of adults do this and are generally 'conformistes saisonniers'); 'pays de mission' having a minimum of 20 per cent unbaptized or uncatechized children.

<sup>1</sup> Adrien Dansette: *Destin du Catholicisme français* (1926-1956). Flammarion, Paris, 1957, 975 francs.

André Deroo: *L'Épiscopat français dans la mêlée de son temps* (1930-1954). Bonne Presse, Paris, 1955, n.p.

There are three areas of 'observance majoritaire': Western France (Brittany less Finistère, part of Maine and Anjou, the Vendée and Normandy), the Massif Central (with fragments of Auvergne, Lyonnais, Languedoc, and Guyenne), Eastern France (Alsace and most of Lorraine and Franche Comté); and some smaller areas like Artois and the Basque country. 'Observance minoritaire' describes three areas also: North and Central France, then Gascony and the greater part of Guyenne, and lastly Provence and some of Dauphiné, and the Mediterranean littoral to Roussillon. 'Pays de mission' covers two large regions, Aude and Creuse, Haute Vienne and Corrèze.

All this concerns rural France. Urban France was still being studied when M. Dansette's book was printed, but provisional results show in Paris 13.6 per cent of the population (including children) attending Sunday Mass, 13.1 per cent in Marseilles, 14.7 per cent in Toulouse, 20.9 per cent in Lyons. Mass-goers above thirteen years old in the Northern industrial areas show the following figures: Tourcoing 36 per cent, Lille 17 per cent, Roubaix 20 per cent. Again, in each of these towns, there are different percentages according to the sociological structures of the various 'quartiers'. Ste Etienne provides interesting statistics according to trades and professions: 'pratiquants' among miners are 5 per cent, factory workers 10 per cent, clerks 30 per cent, engineers 60 per cent, tradespeople 26 per cent, small craftsmen 20 per cent, professional people 40 per cent. This picture contrasts with a similar cross-section for a working-class quarter of Paris: workers 2.5 per cent, clerks 4.5 per cent, civil servants and local government officials 10 per cent, small craftsmen 4.5 per cent, managers 12 per cent, professional classes 10 per cent. The surveys of Père Lhande (*Le Christ dans la banlieue*, 1927) and the Abbés Godin and Daniel (*La France pays de mission*, 1942) revealed the by now well-known de-christianized atmosphere of the Paris suburbs. Even more startling is Père Quoist's recent survey of a dockers' quarter in Rouen in which, out of 661 dockers, only one was a practising Catholic.

There are many other variables in these surveys, too detailed to go into here—for instance, the proportion of 'pratiquants' who fall by the wayside between adolescence and adulthood, differential statistics for men and women, the interaction of regional and social traditions. But from these figures by and large, one can

build up a picture of the degree of the de-christianization of France. The important thing one has to retain from those introductory sections to M. Dansette's book is that there is now really no question of the Church fighting an external enemy on a religious basis, like the Catharist heresy, or Protestantism. The enemy now, within a general Christian structure which is, naturally, often more apparent than real, rejects the structure totally, or—just as difficult to deal with—is contemptuously neutral. In the case of the urban proletariat, as opposed to the peasant, there has never been even the external Christian structure. This proletariat took shape during the nineteenth century out of the Church's reach—'it was never de-christianized, it was born outside Christianity'.

The social conscience of the Church, with rare exceptions, was not alive to this situation until well into the second half of the nineteenth century, and the social teaching of the Church had little or no effect on the religious behaviour of the working classes. These, growing in awareness of their own power, in a world from which scientific optimism had banished mystery, simply ignored what the Church had to say on the problems which occupied them—love and death, wealth and society, justice and the family.

The Church was singularly ill-fitted to penetrate this carapace of indifference and hostility. Nor was this because the numbers of its priests gave more cause for alarm than elsewhere. In 1949 there was one priest for every 610 Catholics in France—in theory (roughly the same as Switzerland, Canada, Belgium, Holland, Italy and the U.S.A.). But taking into account the regulars—one quarter of the total—and the maldistribution between one diocese and another, and between urban and rural areas, the picture is not so satisfactory. For example, 21,000 priests (53 per cent of the total) serve 18,000,000 rural parishioners, whereas 7,200 have charge of 24,000,000 living in non-rural areas.

There has also been a shift in the social provenance of the clergy—in the nineteenth century the majority were from peasant stock, whereas now vocations tend to come from the middle classes (up to 60 per cent in 1936). Their education leaves much to be desired, though M. Dansette characterizes as 'excessively severe' the report of a commission set up by the Assembly of Cardinals and Archbishops which states categorically: 'The general level of studies amongst the clergy is distressingly low. . . .

This is very serious since this decline is in contrast with the raising of the cultural level in the country as a whole. Formerly the curé was the educated man of the village. Today he is, in fact, not merely less educated than the schoolteacher but less so than many of the peasants.' In fact, says M. Dansette, it is not that education as information is lacking, but rather that the type of education given in the seminary unfits the future priest for the sort of life he will have to live outside—and he quotes the Abbé Godin's anecdote (pre-1930 vintage) of a meeting of a hundred priests at which not one knew the price of a meal in a working-class café. They may be trained in anti-rationalist and anti-protestant apologetic, but they are not trained to deal with the real problems they will meet on the mission. The seminaries waste manpower, too, because neither the dioceses nor the orders will overcome their own 'particularism' at the instructional stage. So in Lyons, in 1950, six religious congregations had a separate scholasticate which meant that, adding in the members of the Faculty of Theology, fifty-five professors were teaching four hundred pupils.

'If middle-class comfort is soporific, extreme poverty is oppressive.' Many priests live, not in poverty, but in actual want, and their pastoral administration suffers as a result, being inadequately carried out or done through the good offices of too many 'vieilles filles' who create a barrier between the priest and his congregation.

This is a very depressing picture, and when it was summarized in *The Tablet* in an article by Mr S. Ruff, it called forth a letter from M. Pierre Janelle attacking the impression derived from purely statistical sources, and suggesting that the intensity of the life that is in fact lived in the Catholic parish in France is not always capable of being assessed by such methods. This is no doubt true, but one must admit the general accuracy of M. Dansette's view of French Catholicism on the quantitative side at any rate. Where is the evidence to the contrary in the terms he uses?

How is the French Church dealing with the situation? Several approaches are outlined historically, with a wealth of very apt formulation, and an uncommon literary skill in qualifying and summarizing. One is the closer articulation of the episcopate. In the past neither the Papacy nor the French Government had viewed French episcopal assemblies without disquiet, the former

fearing—very naturally—the resurgence of gallicanism, the latter any strengthening of the spiritual power. After the first world war, the Holy See promoted the holding of an Assembly of Cardinals and Archbishops to discuss the reintegrating of Alsace-Lorraine, and this body has since kept on meeting to discuss matters affecting the Church as a whole throughout France, and retains an executive acting through the Archbishop of Paris for *ad hoc* decisions. This body has of course no juridical status in canon law, any more than any other episcopate, and cannot make decisions on the internal affairs of any one diocese over the head of the bishop. But its biannual meetings give a continuity to the deliberations of the French episcopate, which it had lacked since the Revolution. Even more important is the greater role given to the laity—a role won almost in the teeth of the bishops in the nineteenth century by such men as Montalembert, and thrust upon the laity by the bishops in the twentieth. The laity, whose special priesthood can be safely stressed as we recede in time from the Reformation which attacked the sacrament of order, had founded monasticism, and in modern France lay scholars in philosophy and theology (MM. Maritain, Gilson, Marcel, Guitton, Marrou) have done at least as much as the clergy to bring about the renaissance in Catholic thought heralded by the pontificate of Leo XIII. From the time of the old *Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Française* (A.C.J.F.) founded in 1886, lay organizations have been formed to cover many aspects of life, some as youth organizations grouping factory workers, agricultural workers and students. The *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne* (J.O.C.), possibly the best-known of these, was originally a Belgian movement, and it is interesting to see that in spite of its triumphal progress within the Catholic community before the war, culminating in the Congress of 1937 when it seemed to be sweeping all before it, M. Dansette thinks its success was deceptive, being limited to the existing structures of the parish. Together with the other movements of Catholic youth which concentrate on one professional or class grouping, the J.O.C. takes the considerable risk of hardening an already existing social structure within the Church instead of making these structures melt in the apostolic fire; but the relations, or rather lack of relations, between working class and bourgeoisie being what they are in France, the more prudent course seemed to be to allow each social structure to foster its

own organizations. It is, nevertheless, curious that this 'segregation' within the framework of Catholic Action should be accepted as necessary by people who would reject with abhorrence any suggestion that racial segregation should operate in a similar fashion.

These organizations were often the object of incomprehension and hostility on the part of those bishops who remained closed to the new ideas or who did not like the idea of corporate bodies in their diocese receiving their orders direct from Paris. They preferred the once useful but (by the nineteen-thirties) superseded *Fédération Nationale Catholique* (F.N.C.) of General Castelneau, an apt instrument for fighting an anticlericalism of the Combes variety or its heirs, but impervious to any other than conservative (and sometimes monarchist) ideas. There were some tricky moments when these various movements were co-ordinated in 1931 in Catholic Action at national level. Cardinal Verdier, the newly appointed Archbishop of Paris, seems to have caved in before Castelneau's insistence that *his* organization should represent Catholic interests on the political plane. Only the rapid development of political events in the thirties made it clear that Catholic Action had to free itself from the incubus represented by the political attitude of the F.N.C.

Much more important, in M. Dansette's view, than this rejuvenation of lay activity in the Church, was the awakening, the 'prise de conscience' of the French clergy, to which he devotes the greater part of his book, stressing particularly the development of the worker-priest movement. Even here, though, he can point to the effect of the teaching of lay philosophers: M. Maritain, whose *Humanisme intégral* had a great effect on the younger clergy in its careful distinction between the truths of Christianity and the outward forms, valuable but ephemeral, of Christendom; and Mounier whose review *Esprit* challenged Catholic acceptance of the social and economic forms of the 'established disorder'. On the younger clergy the war and the occupation had a tremendous impact. The hierarchy was bound very naturally to the Pétain régime. The 'bas clergé', on the other hand, were less inclined (and less compelled) to diplomacy and the acceptance of the outward forms of legal government when these were used to cover manifest violations of the natural law (massacres of the Jews, deportations, torturing of prisoners).

When French workers were conscripted for service in German industry, priests went with them and shared their conditions. Among them, and among those priests who underwent the now forgotten horrors of the Nazi concentration camps, grew a new apostolic ferment.

This ferment was encouraged by intellectual developments, with particular impulses from Jesuits and Dominicans—the latter, according to M. Dansette, taking the leading intellectual role held in the nineteenth century by Benedictines and Jesuits. The review *La Vie Intellectuelle* (the favourite reading of Pius XI) was only one of the many activities of a publishing house in the very forefront of Catholic thought, which included also the tremendous enterprise of the *Bible de Jérusalem*, the patristic collection *Sources chrétiennes* undertaken with Jesuit collaboration, the liturgical renewal associated with the *Centre de Liturgie pastorale* and the review *Maison-Dieu*, and lastly the collection *Rencontres* dealing with contemporary sociological problems.

In this collection appeared a book which was to galvanize the younger clergy, *La France pays de mission*, by the Abbés Godin and Daniel (1943), of which the most interesting suggestion was the abandonment of the traditional parish structure in the new missionary shock tactics envisaged, in favour of sending out teams of specially trained priests who would have no parochial obligations but would penetrate directly into the workers' *milieu* by using such organizations as trades unions, technical training centres, homes of working-class families, etc. As Jocist chaplains, they knew working-class youth reasonably well. They did not know—or not so well—adult workers. They did not realize that to describe the attitude of mind of the de-christianized working classes as pagan was totally inadequate, since many of the most vigorous of its members were in fact animated by precise and passionate beliefs in a new form of society based on a perfectible technology, less accessible to Christianity than the pagans of what were traditionally regarded as mission fields. The modern European unbeliever did not regard the priest as an emissary of a superior and materially more desirable civilization. Quite the contrary. The priest had no 'edge' of this kind at all.

Perhaps the ideas of Godin and Daniel would have seemed only sparks in the wind in other circumstances; but Cardinal Suhard read their book. M. Dansette is careful to point out that

this much maligned prelate was not suddenly in 1943 made aware of the moral and spiritual state of France; it had been his constant preoccupation for two decades. The reading of *La France pays de mission* indicated a possible solution, and in his own pastoral *Essor ou déclin de l'Eglise* (1947) he took up the cause in general terms, insisting that the future of the Church lay neither with what he called, rather inaptly, 'modernism', the tendency to adapt without thinking, nor with 'integrist', the refusal to adapt at all combined with the conviction that the ephemeral social garb of the Church can be equated with its unchanging teaching. The French Church must not let the modern world create itself apart from God, and the Church must assume as much of its 'period' as possible in order to penetrate into this world in the making.

He had already created the *Mission de France* in 1941 to meet the situation, with its own seminary at Lisieux in charge of the Sulpicians under M. Augros, its first superior. This project, initially aimed at supplying the deficiencies in numbers of priests in certain dioceses, was later to supply the worker-priests with recruits. At the beginning of 1944 a session was held at Lisieux at which Cardinal Suhard was present—and from this sprang the idea of a concentration upon the capital; in mid-1944 the *Mission de Paris* was launched, consisting of six priests in a house in the XVIIIth arrondissement, whose purpose was to create new Christian communities from amongst those workers with whom they managed to make contact, partly by methods reminiscent of the Salvation Army, partly by spectacular demonstrations of the faith (open-air Masses, the Stations of the Cross in the Place de Clichy, etc.). These new communities were not to be integrated into the old parish system. The priests themselves proposed to live within these communities 'the life of the priesthood in a missionary way, based on the life of the poor, dependent, stripped of everything—a collective life; in the place where they lived, in the way they spent their leisure, in a constant effort of daily communication, with a clear desire to belong to a given social class and to live on the level of the best of the members of that class'. There was no other theory to begin with. The approach was empirical, and the priests of the *Mission de Paris* were content to see what might become of it. The numbers of these communities were always few, in the XIIth and XVIIIth arrondissements and



in the suburbs at Billancourt and Montreuil, and they had three chapels at their disposal for services, although the priests were authorized to say Mass in their own rooms.

Their initial success, small as it was, was probably entirely due to the shaking up of life in France, particularly in the capital, during the months of the Liberation. After the war, things slowed down. New methods were on their way: the worker-priests, who were to penetrate de-christianized industrial France at its heart—in the factory. The idea preceded the *Mission de France* in time, if not in full realization—the word itself goes back to 1869, and the idea of a priest undertaking manual labour is hardly new. But the currency spread from 1945, after the publication of the Jesuit Père Perrin's book *Journal d'un prêtre-ouvrier en Allemagne*, although the honour of being the first real worker-priest goes not to him but to a Dominican, Père Loew, who worked as a Marseilles docker in 1941 for a social survey and later stayed on not for sociological but for apostolic reasons. The compulsory labour service drafted into Germany, from 1942, 800,000 French workers, and the hierarchy conceived the notion of priests accompanying them in the same way as chaplains accompany the army. The presence of these priests could not be concealed from the Germans, and of twenty-five, three died in concentration camps or as a result of their detention.

Their work was a revelation, not only to others but to themselves: the 2,000 seminarists and 8,000 militants of Catholic Action for whom they were to act as spiritual directors were not the only contacts they made. They discovered at first hand the real life of the French proletariat, and in the exaggerated condition of exile. The way they had done this, sharing totally the life of factory workers, indicated to them that the Abbé Godin's Salvation Army treatment might suffice for a sub-proletariat but that for the new worker proud of his own skill and organization, the approach had to be as to an equal. In the words of Cardinal Feltrin (1953): 'The working-class world, separated from the Church, has its own history, its traditions, its moral values, its spiritual riches and a certain unity which forbids it accepting the stranger in its midst who comes to teach it. To exert an influence upon it, one must be "naturalized", recognized as a member of that world.'

Two problems resulted from the activities of the worker-

priests. In their desire to pursue their identification with the working-class community to its utmost conclusion, they did not simply work alongside the workers, but joined their trade unions and—a not unnatural development—in a number of cases became officials of the unions. From this it was a short step to participating in demonstrations organized by the unions, and to the inevitable clashes with the police. In this type of social conflict, in which it appeared to a number of worker-priests that the really active and most uncompromising incarnation of the defence of working-class interests was Communism, some of them accepted the risks involved in co-operation with the Communists, and found themselves on certain issues at loggerheads with Catholic trade unionists from the *Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens*. Some of the priests were not particularly well informed on social problems; in fact M. Dansette says that the martyr of the movement, Père Favreau, who was killed in the docks at Bordeaux, gleaned his ideas on social and economic affairs from the daily press—he had had no training in these matters before becoming a worker-priest. This tendency was increased by the powerful influence on the movement of the group of *chrétiens progressistes* around Père Montuclard whose vision was based essentially on the continuing possibility, found already in the Resistance, of union and co-operation with the Communists for specific ends. When, after 1947, the Communists and the left-wing parties born from the Resistance separated for good, the increasingly intransigent attitudes of both sides gradually put an intolerable strain on the loyalties of the *progressistes* whose tight-rope walking became an impossibility. The dilemma of the worker-priests was a cruel one. 'If we share the fate of the working class, we must share in its struggles', declared one, and even though the modalities of the struggle may be—often were in fact—dictated by the Communist Party (like the demonstrations against the arrival of the American General Ridgway in 1952 to command SHAPE), they felt they had to participate, in order not to betray their position as genuine workers.

There were also dangers to their sacerdotal life: their very isolation from contacts with other clergy and the usual spiritual nourishment of a communal Catholic life proved a strain too great for some. Their situation was difficult enough, in all conscience, without political complications. These came in with

Père Montuclard and the progressist group *Jeunesse de l'Eglise* (dating back to 1936) for whom identification with a Marxist future for humanity was an essential feature in re-thinking the Church's position in the modern world. Not all by any means of the worker-priests read the progressist review *La Quinzaine*, which later ceased publication after its views were condemned by the hierarchy; but M. Dansette makes it clear that Père Montuclard's book *Les événements et la foi*, which was put on the Index in March 1953, gave a quasi-marxist orientation to some of the activities of the worker-priests which could not have been anticipated when their apostolate began.

One can imagine how the delations to Rome multiplied—always twice as numerous from France as from the rest of the Church combined—and one can see what a difficult brief the three French Cardinals who went to Rome in November 1953 had, when they tried to put the worker-priests' viewpoint and reach a *modus vivendi* in this matter with the Holy See, by now justifiably alarmed. When the new conditions for the worker-priests were published by Cardinal Feltin on his return, and it was seen that one in particular, the insistence on a three-hour factory day, would obliterate their task as they had known it, about half of the ninety-odd refused to submit. M. Dansette does not gloss over the pain caused by Rome's decision, and he stresses that the submission required was, in the words of Cardinal Gerlier, 'a task of heroic obedience imposed on their priestly conscience'. The upheaval caused in France was every bit as great as that brought about by the Modernist crisis, and received much greater publicity; but looking back even from the distance of five years, it is clear not simply that Rome had no choice to do other than she did, but that in fact the choice was the right one, and that although the experiment of contact with the working class was to go on in other forms, the particular modality of the worker-priest experiment had gone as far as it usefully could.

That M. Dansette's book is written with a subdued passion becomes more evident when one compares it with the Abbé Deroo's account of the French bishops between 1930 and 1954; one would hardly think the same period was under review though his dates coincide so closely with M. Dansette's. M. Deroo rarely ventures an opinion in his own person, and the tone is definitely muted; but his work has its own value as a documentation for

the period, since he quotes very fully from pastoral letters and other episcopal statements, and gives precise references where M. Dansette is content to refer the reader to chapter bibliographies. Taken together, these two books form an invaluable summary of evidence on one of the most interesting periods of Church history in France. But both of them can be criticized for one grave omission: they do not deal adequately with the intellectual life of the Church.

M. Deroo is content to retail the statements of the French bishops on the important social and political problems of the day; M. Dansette's interests too are fundamentally sociological. They refer to the restrictions placed on both Jesuits and Dominicans, but in neither of them do we get a full account of the reason for these moves or their impact on the development of the Church's life in France. M. Dansette certainly gives weight to the influence of M. Maritain and Mounier on the younger clergy of pre-war days; but one cannot go either to him or to M. Deroo for an account of the real contribution of the Church to literature and learning, even though this is what makes the French Church in these days such a shining example to our own intellectual life as Catholics, which is still in many respects contemporary with the dinosaur. 'The tremendous service France will do the world', said Cardinal Suhard, 'is to live out before it and on its behalf, a decisive experiment of which the stakes are both the everlastingness of Christianity and the survival of civilization. It seems to be God's wish to allow France to be a proving-ground for the tests which lie ahead. In these decisive years, and before other nations, France seems to be living through a crisis of life which in other peoples is still lying beneath the surface like a secret sickness eating them away. What we are living through now other peoples will live through in their turn. This or that structure which today seems unshakeable, will crumble to the ground unless these other peoples, immunized by the saving vaccine which is being developed in our blood, discover in our difficult victory the remedy required by the sickness of which they have found the first germs also in us. France is the Church's laboratory for many of its ideas and movements, as the relationships and tensions created by the Algerian war have shown—too late to be treated in the books under review. It is because of this that the extremes to which French Catholics willingly go in pursuit of an

idea can be supremely instructive for us, and it would be a pity if some English Catholic publisher did not give English readers a translation of M. Dansette's work so that the passion and ferment of France might shake up our duller and more pragmatic selves.

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### NOTICE

1961 will mark the fifth centenary of the canonization of St Catherine of Siena. To mark the occasion it is proposed to erect a monument to her in Rome at a spot often passed by the Saint in her last days as she went to pray at the Tomb of the Apostle. Those who wish to assist in this project should send their offerings to the account of Istituto Opere di Religione, Vatican, at Barclays Bank Ltd, Chief Foreign Branch, 168 Fenchurch Street, London, E.C.3, with the mention 'Missionarie della Scuola—Monumento a S. Caterina da Siena'.