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Robert Dumont, *La Condamnation des prêtres-ouvriers (1953-1954). Étude de cas à travers les documents*. Postface by Denis Pelletier. Paris: Karthala, 2019. 710 pp. €42.00 (pb). ISBN9782811126711; €32.99 (eb). ISBN 9782811126711.

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On March 1, 1954, the so-called “worker-priest experiment” officially came to an end, as per the orders of Pope Pius XII. For the approximately one hundred priests who had committed their lives to laboring and living alongside working-class communities in France,^[1] Rome’s stern instructions that they return to a more conventional parish life was a betrayal of the highest order. For them, being a worker-priest was no “experiment,” but a way of life: a desire to be present and to bear witness to the lives of the masses of working people for whom the “bourgeois” Catholic Church had long been perceived as irrelevant or even corrupt. Yet this very proximity to laborers and their social and political concerns stoked the anti-Communist Pope Pius XII’s fears of a Marxist incursion into the Church, despite his earlier support for the initiative, leading to the decision to terminate the worker-priest movement. This decision, which the renowned Dominican theologian Marie-Dominique Chenu termed “the most important religious event since the French Revolution,”^[2] provoked an outcry from within the progressive wing of the Church and polarized public opinion, which was just as divided as the Church on the issue.

The drama of this moment surrounding the condemnation of the worker-priests has seemingly been forgotten in France today, yet it encapsulates many of the central questions that preoccupied the Catholic Church in France in the post-Liberation years. With this substantial and rich collection of previously unseen primary source documents, Father Robert Dumont has assembled an invaluable resource for historians of contemporary France and Catholicism. Compiled from the private papers of worker-priests, as well as bishops’ records and correspondence in the archives of the dioceses of Lille, Lyon, Bourgoin-Jallieu, Bordeaux, Limoges, and Paris, the documents reveal the fraught internal discussions between the bishops of the Church, between the pope or the papal nuncio and the French hierarchy, and between worker-priests themselves and their spiritual leaders. Month by month, and even week by week in the period preceding the March 1, 1954 deadline, these records illustrate how the French Catholic Church grew increasingly divided over whether this unorthodox approach to evangelization should be permitted to continue. Dumont was himself a member of the second generation of worker-priests, who took up their positions after 1965 following the Second Vatican Council. After working for twenty years in this role, Dumont dedicated himself to documenting, editing, and publishing extensive scholarship on the worker-priest movement through his editorial work at the publishing house Karthala, where he directed two collections, *Signes des temps* and *Sens et*

conscience.^[3] The former collection specializes in publishing titles by authors who had themselves been worker-priests (p. 696). Until his death in July 2021 at the age of 94, Dumont was also a member of the Oratoire de France in Paris, based at the Église Saint-Eustache. Together with his long-time collaborators and historians of the movement, Nathalie Viet-Depaule and Charles Suaud,^[4] Dumont was one of the leading experts on the worker-priest movement.

The immediate origins of that movement date to the Occupation years, when the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Suhard, led the Church's efforts to address the nearly total absence of institutional Catholicism in working-class areas of the country. On July 24, 1941, Suhard founded the Mission de France, a seminary dedicated to training priests specifically for evangelization in working-class zones.^[5] The Mission de Paris, founded two years later in 1943, had the same goal but concentrated its efforts on the Parisian red belt, where Communism attracted vastly more adherents than Catholicism. The problem of de-Christianization in working-class France was not new, nor had the Church been unaware of the issue until the war years. In the nineteenth century, as Dumont briefly demonstrates in a short section of documentation dedicated to the prehistory of the movement (pp. 11-12), there was concern within the Church about the de-Christianization of the population. The "loss" of the French working class (pp. 62, 691) was, in fact, the primary impetus for the explosion of so-called "specialized" movements within the French Catholic Action movement in the 1930s (pp. 16-17). In particular, the young workers movements (the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne and its feminine counterpart, the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne Féminine) stood at the heart of a new approach to evangelization through lay apostolate, as Gerd-Rainer Horn has also shown.^[6] Yet this program of reclaiming the working-class masses for the Church had failed to live up to the arguably impossible expectations placed upon it of reversing decades of de-Christianization in these milieus, despite the apostolic fervor of the young JOC activists (p. 692). When France mobilized for war in 1939, it became painfully apparent to Catholic leaders how much of a rift remained between the working-class masses and the Church; not only had the evangelization of workers failed on a numerical level, with few "returning" to the Church, but the handful who did tended to abandon the working class for the aspirant middle classes when they did so, leaving the working classes unchanged in their relationship to the Church. Worse still, the Church suffered an increasingly serious image problem among workers, who associated the institutional Church with money and power. Clearly, new approaches were needed, not only in evangelization, but within the Church itself, which, in some assessments, had become too "bourgeois" and inward-looking in culture.^[7]

It was in this context that, with the encouragement of Cardinal Suhard, Fathers Yvan Daniel and Henri Godin published the bombshell book *La France, pays de mission?* on 12 September 1943 (pp. 20-21).^[8] In the aftermath of this publication and of the liberation of France which followed within the year, the idea for teams of worker-priests came about and, with the blessing of Cardinal Suhard, was permitted to go ahead. Historian Guillaume Cuchet argues that the worker-priest ideal embodied new "sociological and missionary" ideas born in part out of the wartime experiences of Catholic priests and seminarians in German captivity and forced labor, and Denis Pelletier broadly echoes the importance of the war years in his assessment in the postface (p. 693).^[9] The war years had also given a number of Catholics the experience of taking independent decisions, including—as in the case of the "spiritual resistance" movement *Témoignage Chrétien*—acting against the instructions of the Catholic hierarchy.^[10] Cuchet rightly suggests that historians have not yet "measured all the consequences of this partial disenchantment with the hierarchy" that resulted from the war years, especially given the

persistent “cult of obedience” that characterized Catholic culture in these years.[11] In his selection of texts, Dumont explores this complicated legacy through the case study of the worker-priests, who embodied the ambivalence of many activist Catholics in the post-war decade in seeking both to expand the worldview of their Church while remaining mindful of their bishops’ instructions and those of Rome.

When Suhard founded the Mission de France and the Mission de Paris, neither he nor the authors of *La France, pays de mission?* had intended that the priests ministering to workers would themselves become full-time laborers, but the limited success of more traditional forms of outreach led to the adoption of work as a form of evangelization. Dumont explores the circumstances of the post-Liberation months that led to this decision; as a letter from Jacques Hollande, superior of the Mission de Paris, reveals, “pour beaucoup d’ouvriers les évêques étaient ‘vendus’ aux Allemands” (p. 24). To compensate for the hierarchy’s collaborationist reputation, a handful of priests asked the Cardinal for permission to enter the factories “avec la foule des ouvriers” (p. 24); the Capuchins of Nanterre and the Jesuits under Father Villain chose the same path, which they understood, at the time, as a permanent commitment to living the working-class life with all its associated privations (pp. 25-26). The result of “entering into the world of workers” was, for the priests concerned, a “double découverte” (p. 323). First, they came to experience the lives of the working class, “la dureté et la monotonie du travail, de vivre chaque jour dans l’inquiétude du lendemain et dans l’angoisse de l’avenir,” conditions which most of the priests had never known, having come from more affluent families (p. 323). Secondly, as a result of their immersion in this milieu, they soon understood how the working classes saw the Church—with great suspicion. One worker-priest, in a letter to Yvan Daniel in 1950, explained eloquently how these two discoveries were interconnected:

“Je n’ai converti aucun de mes camarades. Beaucoup ne savent pas que je suis prêtre... Chaque fois que je l’ai pu, j’ai saisi l’occasion d’expliquer ma présence en usine. L’explication ne porte que parce qu’elle est appuyée sur une vie qui la confirme: le monde ouvrier ne croit pas aux paroles. L’explication est malgré tout secondaire. Ce qui est essentiel, c’est la preuve donnée, à chaque instant, d’une charité inexplicable. Cela fait tomber des malentendus, cela fait ‘travailler’ les esprits; les idées sur les prêtres, sur la religion bougent. Les ‘catholiques’ ne comprennent pas plus que les non-catholiques. Aux uns et aux autres, il faut donner l’idée du vrai Dieu. Le prêtre-ouvrier n’est pas encore à la phase d’évangélisation. Il est dans une phase préalable: il fait tomber des préjugés, il établit un contact, il crée les conditions d’une rencontre” (p. 75).

Conversion, for the worker-priests and their supporters, thus no longer represented the barometer of success for the movement. Instead of the “reconquest” of the working classes, their mission was what Marie-Dominique Chenu called “presence”: “c’est la première expression, souvent silencieuse en *mots*, mais toujours *en acte*, d’une vraie évangélisation, et du visage alors visible de l’Église.”[12] By bearing witness through their presence in the lives of ordinary people, worker-priests succeeded in presenting a different face of the Church than that of the institution that had seemingly excluded the working classes.[13] But in gaining the trust of their fellow workers, worker-priests needed to participate in all aspects of life, including strikes and, in many cases, union activism in local branches of the Communist-run CGT. Some also joined the pacifist Mouvement de la Paix in supporting the Stockholm appeal and protesting the war in Indochina.[14] In doing so, they felt that they were living the working class’s “espoirs...ses humiliations, ses fatigues, ses luttes, ses oppressions, ses splendeurs” (p. 563).

While Cardinal Suhard was alive, he was able to protect the worker-priests from their critics in France and in Rome, despite harboring his own doubts about aspects of the movement, which persisted even as he affirmed his conviction in the “clarity and faith” of the priests themselves (pp. 34-35). His death in 1949, however, deprived worker-priests of their greatest supporter. The deepening of Cold War divisions that same year likewise spurred Pius XII to forbid any Catholic collaboration with Communists on July 1, 1949. The bulk of Dumont’s sources trace the gradual unravelling of the movement from 1949 onwards, as both Rome and members of the French episcopate questioned whether the apparent compromises the priests were making in their own behavior and in their handling of the conventions of liturgy and sacrament could be justified on the basis of the worthy goal of bringing the workers back to the Church. In his incisive postface, Denis Pelletier summarizes these critiques as falling into two categories: on the one hand, the episcopate feared that the worker-priests were “[ne] plus vraiment des prêtres” because that function required being “‘séparé du monde,’” rather than immersed in it. On the other hand, in light of Rome’s condemnation of collaboration with Communists, growing Cold War tensions, and the worrying reports of Christian persecution in Stalinist Eastern Europe, the episcopate lamented the worker-priests’ tendencies to join their fellow laborers in union activism with the Communist CGT, sometimes even taking up positions of leadership with the union (pp. 693-694). Pelletier suggests that this choice reflected “a form of fascination for Marxist thought and for Communism, but it was first and foremost a way of incorporating the worker’s habitus,” rather than a true ideological conversion and still less an abandonment of the Church (p. 697). The documents confirm this analysis; time and again, worker-priests and their supporters, most notably the Dominican Yves Congar, insisted to the bishops that they remained loyal to the Church, that their purpose was above all else spiritual (pp. 317, 425, 565). Yet they also defended their choices; in response to the recurring critique that the priests had been sent “to give a message” and instead “had received one in return,” a group of Parisian worker-priests responded that “peut-être était-il nécessaire, pour nous et pour l’Église, que nous recevions le message des exploités de la part même de Dieu, pour demeurer plus fidèles à l’Évangile” (p. 425). While worker-priests were divided amongst themselves on how politically involved they should be and disagreed on how to respond to pressure from the bishops and Rome, several very public arrests of worker-priests in relation to the peace movement helped to heighten the bishops’ anxieties, contributing to Pius XII’s eventual decision to terminate the “experiment” in the fall of 1953.

The dramatic end of the movement began on 23 September 1953, when Mgr Marella (the new papal nuncio) convened a gathering at the Archdiocese of Paris to inform the bishops who sponsored the worker-priests of Rome’s decision. In early November, Cardinal Liénart of Lille, Cardinal Feltin of Paris, and Cardinal Gerlier of Lyon travelled to Rome to appeal to the pope, without success, and the cardinals confirmed their capitulation to Rome on November 14, 1953, when they published a declaration in *La Croix* indicating that the “worker-priest experiment” “cannot be maintained in its present form” (p. 478).^[15] On 19 January 1954, the episcopate issued a circular to all worker-priests, informing them that they had until March 1 to conform to the demands of Rome and their hierarchy: most notably, they were forbidden to work more than three hours per day or to take on any “temporal responsibilities” (p. 539). Although the bishops attempted to reassure worker-priests with plans to send more priests to the “monde ouvrier,” and even assured them that they heard the concerns of priests who felt that the bishops were “imposing on [them] conditions which will prevent [them] from accomplishing” their mission of evangelization, seventy-three worker-priests firmly rejected the demands of the bishops and affirmed their commitment to “la lutte des travailleurs pour leur libération” (p. 546). In the end, one-third of the worker-priests formally “submitted” to the Church, but approximately two-

thirds refused to abandon their full-time positions. Known as *insoumis*, the latter continued in their work in defiance of Rome and the hierarchy.[16] The extensive correspondence between these priests and the bishops in the aftermath of the January circular is heart-wrenching reading and constitutes perhaps the most revealing and, indeed, emotional section of Dumont's documentation. The drama concluded, at last, with the purge on February 8, 1954, of some twenty French Dominicans from their positions, including the theologians Yves Congar and Marie-Dominique Chenu; both had protested the decision to end the worker-priest "experiment" and were seen as inciting disobedience among the worker-priests.[17]

While much research remains to be completed on the worker-priest saga, Father Dumont has offered historians an invaluable resource, particularly in compiling documents from private sources that would have been at risk of being lost from the historical record. The diocesan records, too, shed light on the internal workings of the Church in fascinating detail, rounding out the contours of a story about which not enough is yet known. The absence of an index is unfortunate, however, especially as it would have been useful to help keep track of the changing views and notable interventions of individual bishops or priests across the months and years (and 700-plus pages) of the story. Likewise, some readers who are less familiar with the subject will need to cross-reference this collection of previously unseen, mostly internal documents with other central texts—mostly published and accessible in newspapers—that defined the public face of the conflict. Nevertheless, this volume will—as the author expressly hoped—doubtless spur further research into this defining moment of French history and the history of the Catholic Church.

NOTES

[1] In his postface to the volume, Denis Pelletier indicates that approximately one hundred worker-priests were active between 1944 and 1954, but notes that Robert Dumont himself gives the number 87. The larger number aligns with the historiographical consensus. See Denis Pelletier, "Postface," in Robert Dumont, *La Condamnation des prêtres-ouvriers (1953-1954). Étude de cas à travers les documents* (Paris: Karthala, 2019), p. 693.

[2] Quoted in Guillaume Cuchet, "Nouvelles Perspectives historiographiques sur les prêtres-ouvriers (1943-1954)," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 87 (2005), p. 177.

[3] Lucienne Gouguenheim, "Robert Dumont, passeur et transmetteur," *NSAE (Nous sommes aussi l'Église)*, 18 August 2021. <https://nsae.fr/2021/08/18/rene-dumont-passeur-et-transmetteur/> Accessed 26 Feb 2022.

[4] One of the first reference works on the history of the worker-priests is Émile Poulat, *Naissance des prêtres-ouvriers* (Tournai: Casterman, 1965); it was released in a new edition in 1999. See Poulat, *Les Prêtres-ouvriers. Naissance et fin* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1999). Since 2000, a series of autobiographies of worker-priests has been published with Karthala, edited by Nathalie Viet-Depaule and Robert Dumont. See especially Jean-Marie Marzio, Marie Barreau, Yvonne Besnard, Jean Olhagary, and Jean Desailly, *La Mission de Paris. Cinq prêtres-ouvriers insoumis témoignent*, ed. Nathalie Viet-Depaule (Paris: Karthala, 2002); and a collection of interviews of worker-priests: Viet-Depaule and Saud, eds., *Prêtres et ouvriers, une double fidélité mise à l'épreuve (1944-1969)* (Paris: Karthala, 2004). See also Bruno Duriez, Étienne Fouilloux, Alain-René

Michel, Georges Mouradian, and Nathalie Viet-Depaule, eds., *Chrétiens et ouvriers en France 1937-1970* (Paris: Éditions de l'Atelier, 2001).

[5] Sybille Chapeu, *Des chrétiens dans la guerre d'Algérie : L'action de la Mission de France* (Paris: Éditions de l'Atelier, 2004), pp. 12-13.

[6] On the JOC, the JOCF, and the specialized Catholic action, see Gerd-Rainer Horn, *Western European Liberation Theology: The First Wave, 1924-1959* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). See also Bruno Duriez, Étienne Fouilloux, Denis Pelletier, and Nathalie Viet-Depaule, eds., *Les catholiques dans la république, 1905-2005* (Paris: Éditions de l'Atelier, 2005).

[7] Cuchet, "Nouvelles Perspectives historiographiques sur les prêtres-ouvriers (1943-1954)," p. 179.

[8] Henri Godin and Yvan Daniel, *La France: Pays de mission?* (Lyon: Les Éditions de l'Abeille, 1943).

[9] Cuchet, p. 180.

[10] François and Renée Bédarida, eds., *La résistance spirituelle 1941-1944: Les Cahiers clandestins du Témoignage Chrétien* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001).

[11] Cuchet, p. 181.

[12] Cuchet, p. 182. See also Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth Century French Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), pp. 162-164.

[13] Marie-Dominique Chenu, "Le sacerdoce des prêtres-ouvriers," *La Vie intellectuelle* (February 1954), p. 181.

[14] On Christians and anti-Vietnam war protests, see Sabine Rousseau, *La colombe et le napalm: des chrétiens français contre les guerres d'Indochine et du Vietnam: 1945-1975* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2002).

[15] See also *La Croix*, 14 November 1953.

[16] See Émile Poulat and Jean-Claude Poulain, *Les Prêtres-ouvriers* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1954); the authors were, themselves, *insoumis*.

[17] On the purge of February 1954, see François Leprieur, *Quand Rome condamne. Dominicains et prêtres-ouvriers* (Paris: Plon/Le Cerf, "Terre humaine," 1989).

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