The Presence of Priests and Religious Among the Workers of Post-Quiet Revolution Montreal

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For Quebec francophone Catholicism the 1960s were scene to two watershed events which propelled the church in radically new directions. The Second Vatican Council, with its open-door policy toward the modern world (aggiornamento), was a source of internal pressure upon the Quebec church compelling it to move in the direction undertaken by a vocal minority of Catholics during the grande noirceur of the Duplessis years. For those Catholics among the neo-nationalists at Le Devoir, in the équipe of Cité Libre, in the trade union ranks of the Confédération des Travailleurs Catholiques du Canada (CTCC), and among the progressive Dominicans modelled by Georges-Henri Lévesque, the Second Vatican Council was a sign to pursue more rapidly the modernization of their traditional ecclesia.¹

Externally the years of the Quiet revolution forced Quebec Catholicism to adapt to the modernism of a world that it had been able to avoid under the previous political regimes. To be sure modernization and secularization had been present in Quebec before Jean Lesage’s Liberals came to power in 1960. Industrialization had been part of the Quebec landscape since the latter years of the nineteenth century, but the secularization which had been linked habitually to urbanization and mass production lagged behind in Quebec. Even Maurice Duplessis, who welcomed advanced American capitalism into Quebec, was an avowed traditionalist in the political and ecclesiastical realms. Such was not the case with the victorious Liberals of 1960. They made the effective link between moderni-

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zation and secularization, a link which began in earnest a marginalization of the Catholic church from the centres of political and social life among Quebec’s francophones. The state took over the health and welfare apparatus of the province and made significant inroads in the realm of education as well. Although the Liberals did not mirror the anticlericalism of their earlier European counterparts, their programme and their Quebec, called the Quiet Revolution (Révolution Tranquille), produced similar results. Forced to the margins by these events, the church was compelled to approach its society in new and different ways. Thankfully Vatican II encouraged such novel directions.  

One such arena in which the francophone church sought to make an impact in new ways was that of their nation’s working class. A Catholic presence in Quebec’s toiling classes and concern with labour issues was not new for the church. In fact, Catholicism in Quebec had been embroiled in such matters for at least one hundred years. During the early decades of this century social Catholic Jesuits, borrowing consciously from their French counterparts, organized “think-tanks” geared to raising Catholic consciousness and involvement in social issues especially those associated with industrialization and the working class. Instrumental in this was the Jesuit priest Joseph-Papin Archambault. His École Sociale Populaire (ESP) was fundamentally a pamphlet-producing body which enlisted Quebec’s francophone social Catholic elite to write on such subjects as trade unions, social encyclicals, specialized Catholic Action, unemployment, communism, agricultural colonization and the like. Archambault’s Semaine Sociale du Canada built upon this earlier effort. The Semaine was an annual conference which brought together Catholic militants and experts in social matters for the purpose of sharing wisdom and collective inspiration. Further, the church was instrumental in creating a trade union federation called the Confédération des Travailleurs Catholiques du Canada (CTCC) as an alternative to the international unions tied to the American Federation of Labour in the United States. Finally, the Quebec church endorsed the creation of the Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique (JOC) in the early 1930s, a form of specialized Catholic Action patterned after the Belgian and French models. Although these organizations represented a wide variety of methods and experiences, they were uniformly ultra-conservative in ideology and in their adoption of Pius XI’s programme of social corporatism and anticommunism.

This relatively monolithic vision of social Catholicism broke down
rapidly in the wake of the Quiet Revolution and Vatican II, although there were previous evolutionary trends which signalled that change was afoot. Older Catholic “think-tanks” were in decline in the face of such alternatives as those advocated by the Dominican Father Georges-Henri Lévesque and the lay équipe at Cité Libre. In a new wave of militancy the post-World War II CTCC divested itself of clerical control and a discredited corporatism, while working-class Catholic Action redefined its mandate in the face of the growing secularization of an emerging consumer culture. In these rather slow developments can be seen precursors to the more radical projects in Catholic working class missions which exploded on the Quebec scene by the latter 1960s.4

Although such innovations emerged throughout industrialized Quebec, it is not surprising that larger numbers of them were concentrated in the Montreal area. Without minimizing the creativity and impact of Catholic activity among workers in places such as Quebec City and Hull, this paper will deal exclusively with Montreal and its environs. Creative efforts to deal with labouring classes and their issues by committed francophone Catholics in Montreal can be roughly divided into three types although many of the personalities involved overlapped in one or more of these:

(1) Not surprisingly, one such arena was the working-class ghetto. Certainly the church had been present in these neighbourhoods from the beginning, but the form of that presence was almost exclusively the parish, a parish built largely upon a more rural and village model. Within such proletarian Montreal quartiers as Saint-Henri, Pointe Saint-Charles and the entire Centre-Sud sector one could find more recently a variety of radically oriented Catholic support ministries directed toward significant social change. As might be expected there were équipes of working-class Catholic Action in these locales, both the JOC and its adult counterpart the Mouvement des Travailleurs Chrétiens (MTC).5

Beyond the cells of specialized Catholic Action located in Montreal were found those religious orders geared towards providing an active Christian presence among the toiling classes. Their involvement was characterized by intensity, creativity and the nature of each order’s peculiar mandate with the popular classes of the neighbourhoods. Three examples provide sufficient illustration of this. Priests of the Fils de la Charité order were sent into the Pointe Saint-Charles quartier to be part of an effort to renovate the church in conformity with the needs of that working-class neighbourhood. Father Ugo Benfante was a vicar in a parish there and
chose “to have a lifestyle nearer to the life and lifestyle of the labourers” who resided in the area. Consequently he left the rectory to live in the poor rental accommodations so characteristic of the Pointe Saint-Charles area. Père Guy Cousin followed in Benfante’s steps. This full identity with the existence of their marginalized neighbours led them in two directions simultaneously. On the one hand they became linked to cell-group churches consciously modelled after Latin American base Christian communities. On the other hand they joined or helped create self-help groups geared to community organizing activities such as the well-known groupes populaires. Such efforts to transform the neighbourhoods led inevitably into municipal and even provincial politics. It was such a journey that convinced Father Benfante to become a militant in the 1970s Parti Québécois.6

Paralleling the witness of these priests were those orders formed around the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld. These include the Petites Soeurs de l’Assomption, the Petites Soeurs de Jésus and the Petits Frères de l’Évangile. At the very heart of their values was a full identity with and among the poor and marginalized. Their efforts paralleled those of the Fils de la Charité priests especially in their living arrangements and in their daily “hands-on” style of mutual assistance and solidarity. Brother Paul-André Goffart spent his time in repair and renovation work at the lodgings of his poorer neighbours, and Soeur Stephanie of the Petites Soeur de Jésus pursued an open-door policy in the modest home where an équipe of four to five sisters dwelt. In some instances the sisters of this order were trained social workers who served their neighbours in just and compassionate ways through existing governmental bureaucracies.7

One final and rather unique example of the church’s présence among the poor and marginalized in Montreal’s ghettos is the Mission Saints Pierre et Paul, the brain child of the French Dominican Jacques Loew, well-known as one of France’s pioneer worker-priests. Montreal’s example of this community is located in the shadow of the city’s Olympic Stadium and is directed by Father Georges Convert and Brother André Choquette. They view themselves as “cells of the church” who “share the pain and labour of the humble.” Concretely this means using their multipurpose functional building as a residence, a drop-in centre, a worship space and a locus for education after the style promulgated by Paulo Freire in Latin America. On a daily basis the équipe assumes a mundane serving posture such as Brother André’s electrical repair work in his neighbour’s homes.
As well, the community supports local “grass-roots” leadership in those
efforts to do justice and transform the neighbourhood along people-
oriented lines. This life and these activities are fundamental to the religious
pilgrimage as Brother André testifies: “To live one’s daily journey just like
my work companions, that is to live the faith.”

(2) Another locus of church presence among the labouring classes
was, quite appropriately, at the work place itself. Here a number of priests
and religious adopted an incarnation of full-time toil after the worker-priest
model developed decades earlier in France. Not surprisingly many of these
priests, nuns and lay brothers took up this employment in the Montreal
metropole. In fact, initial experiments in this form of ministry emerged out
of Montreal’s archdiocese. A number of Catholic militants, religious and
lay, met together in the late 1960s under the auspices of Msgr. Grégoire to
flesh out new and vital ways to reach a working class increasingly
alienated from the church. The upshot of these discussions led the church
to send two of its priests, the Jesuit André Pellerin and Ugo Benfante, to
trade schools as preparation for a working-class life. Shortly thereafter they
entered the full-time workforce as the means to earn their bread. Ironically
the only labour they were able to find bore no relation to their job-training.
In this initial experience they learned a fundamental reality of proletarian
life, namely that job choice and preparation were frequently more myth
than reality. Such was their baptism of fire.

Soon others followed suit including Jesuits and priests, nuns and lay
brothers from Petits Frères and Petites Soeurs orders. Capuchins formed
a significant grouping of a total numbering around thirty by the early
1980s, and even a few secular priests joined their brothers and sisters from
the monastic movement. Factory and shift labour came to define their
existence. Their life centered increasingly on their toil, and their lodging
and neighbourhood social and political life was shaped by their work hours
and the habitually low pay they received. Unhealthy and dangerous
conditions combined with monotonous toil and few benefits was the lot
they shared with their proletarian brothers and sisters.

However, for them this life was an incarnation of the gospel, a free
choice of solidarity with the workers, the poor and the marginalized. Sister
Marie-Paule Lebrun joined the women in her neighbourhood collective at
the Coleco Plant in Montreal where she helped assemble “Cabbage-Patch
Kids” under the most oppressive of conditions. It was full identity with her
sisters that she sought, since she was convinced that she could not “under-
stand that factory setting without living it.” The Jesuit worker-priest Rosaire Tremblay called his life of toil “fidelity to the Gospel and to the church” through “being present within the world of the oppressed.” Father Guy Boulanger called his working life “true solidarity with the poor and exploited” as well as “a new way to live the Christian life . . . and celebrate the Christian mystery.” Fils de la Charité Guy Cousin described this solidarity as a partisanship on “the side of the Gospel and the Kingdom.” “I wished through manual toil,” he concluded, “to become naturalized as a worker, to witness to the gospel in the pit of industrial labour.”

Finally, this incarnational solidarity was the primary impulse which led these women and men to take up the gauntlet of worker struggle. Characteristically this took the form of the union movement. Brother Paul-André Goffart chaired a union committee on health and safety and was part of a protest against company disregard of persistent lead fumes at the plant where he worked. Marie-Paule Lebrun was active in her Fédération des Travailleurs et Travailleuses du Québec local at the Caleco plant. Her only regret in this activity was that she was not militant enough. Worker-priests were involved, as well, in union organizing. Both Jacques Tanguay and Guy Cousin created union locals for the Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux over against worker organizations which they and their comrades deemed to be too “cozy” with the “patrons.” This they accomplished in the midst of strikes, intimidation and even physical threats. For them such militancy was not extraneous to their priestly vocation. Rather it was a fundamental facet of that incarnation built upon class solidarity and “the liberation of the poor.”

(3) The last creative form of ministry “for” and “with” the working class and the urban poor after the Quiet revolution was the most traditional of the three types. In fact, it bore striking parallels to the older Jesuit social Catholic “think-tanks” such as the École Sociale Populaire and the Semaines Sociales du Canada. However, the more recent models were radically different in both style and content. Although they could be found in numerous urban centres throughout Quebec, the Montreal-based Centre de Pastorale en Milieu Ouvrier (CPMO) is illustrative of the type. In its style and practice it is notably more participatory and “grass-roots” than its corporatist predecessors. None of this was particularly surprising since the impetus for its founding was the Fils de la Charité priest Claude Lefebvre. Though from a middle-class family Lefebvre was convinced that the church needed “teams of priests for the working and popular class worlds.”
He trained in such a context and served at parishes located in working-class ghettos. This experience led him to solicit the necessary episcopal support which led to the founding of the CPMO in 1970.\textsuperscript{13}

Initially the CPMO concentrated on the training and shaping (formation) of priests seeking to minister among the workers in their own quartiers, but within a few years this perspective was broadened. Since that time the CPMO has become a network of Catholic activists including priests, nuns, lay brothers and laity from the community-based groupes populaires and specialized working-class Catholic Action youth and adult. Joining with the JOC, the MTC, an équipe from the journal Vie Ouvrière and a team of independent Christian socialists called Politisés Chrétiens, the CPMO challenged the Quebec episcopate to create a renovated and radical “church on the move” over against a “church with its brakes on.” This was the essence of the well-known colloquy held at Cap Rouge (1974), a colloquy which marked the high point of progressive influence within the Catholic establishment of Quebec.\textsuperscript{14}

Since Cap-Rouge the CPMO has followed a fairly predictable path in both content and action. This pattern was set under the leadership of the ex-Oblate novice Raymond Levac. In fact, his leadership at the CPMO, which began in 1976, included that period of his own religious journey from clerical to lay status. Since the late 1970s the CPMO has been characterized by a core network (reseau) of lay and clerical activists who served as animateurs for the team. Invariably they were militants themselves who lived in working class neighbourhoods and toiled with the residents there for social change. In this context the CPMO defined itself as “a centre of formation for popular organizations and trade unions” with a four-fold approach: (1) as a “resource bank” of people; (2) as a place of militant training; (3) as a crossroads (carrefour) of debate for justice advocates; and (4) as a locus for the publication of practical resources for militant groups.\textsuperscript{15}

The CPMO practiced this four-fold mandate with verve, both under the directorship of Levac and his successor, the former priest Jean-Guy Casaubon. Its workshops, its solidarity meetings and its publications served to link up and focus diverse militant groups within the workplace and primarily the urban neighbourhoods of Quebec and especially Montreal. Of prime importance were the CPMO’s efforts to promote the église populaire, Quebec’s form of the well-known Latin American base Christian communities. For the CPMO these neighbourhood churches were pro-
The presence and activities of francophone Catholics in the Montreal ghettos of modernized secular Quebec is markedly different than the years when Catholicism exercised a notable influence over the province’s infrastructure. Certainly traditional Catholicism survives in Montreal, but in the city’s working class and poorer neighbourhoods there has been a more radical Catholic presence. Since the Quiet revolution and Vatican II marginalized Montreal has witnessed a more militant Catholic Action, parishes attuned to the “grass-roots,” priests and religious taking up full-time factory labour and community-based “think-tanks.” This contrasts sharply with an older day when Catholic social consciousness was less participatory and more directive.

Endnotes

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3. The following works may be consulted for more detail: Baum, “Catholicism and Secularization,” 30-33; Linteau, Histoire, 70, 90-91; Jean Hamelin and Nicole Gagnon, Histoire du catholicisme québécois, le XXe siècle, Tome 1, 1898-1940 (Montréal: Boréal, 1984), 215-229; 285-289, 406-410, 420-425;


