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A Piece Marking the 50th Anniversary of the Publication of Gilbert Cesbron's *Les Saints Vont en Enfer* : an Irishman's Diary

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An Irishman's Diary

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I wonder how many people are aware of the worker-priest movement in France? It began when Cardinal Suhard, Archbishop of Paris, commissioned two priests, Henri Godin and Yvan Daniel, Chaplains with the Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique (Catholic Youth Movement), to write a report on the fall-off in religious practice among the French working classes.

In 1943, their findings were published in a highly influential book, *France, Pays de Mission?*, which suggested that France had become a pagan country and that the Catholic Church had almost completely lost touch with the proletariat, who associated it, perhaps justifiably, with the business and ruling elites.

Suhard, from a less than privileged background, was upset by the book's manuscript. He resolved to reverse the chasm between the working class and the church by establishing a seminary, the *Mission de France*, from which soon began to emerge what are referred to as the worker-priests, men whose vocation involved first-hand experience of gruelling manual labour. The hope was that through sharing the lives of other workers in factories and mines throughout France, their Christian witness might bring some back to the fold.

However, the priests, identifying closely with the plight of their fellow workers, became active in trade unionism and were so critical of the rich industrialists who controlled the salaries and working conditions of their employees, that they were regularly accused of being crypto-communists. Such were the concerns in Rome that Pope Pius XII, obsessed with the dangerous advance of communism during the Cold War era, put an end to the worker-priest experiment in 1954. It would be reactivated in the wake of the more open atmosphere engendered by Vatican II.

The worker-priests inspired many people in France and were the subject of several books. None is better known than Gilbert Cesbron's best-selling novel, *Les Saints vont en enfer* (Saints in Hell). This year is the 60th anniversary of the publication of this fictional account of the Abbé Pierre's trials and tribulations in the suburban working class district of Sagny. He encounters every type of human misery: babies and young children being fatally attacked in their beds by rats; women who seek abortions rather than give birth to another hopeless existence; hunger, resentment, violence and suicide. And yet, when he comes home from the factory in the evenings, he is invigorated by the thought of being capable of offering assistance to the members of his chosen community.

Cesbron's admiration for the worker-priests is clear from his depiction of the Abbé Pierre. This is a priest who may not bring about any significant increase in the number of children presenting for Baptism or Holy Communion, but his presence in a deprived community, his struggle to improve the lives of those who live in Sagny, is discernible in the people's warm embrace of his ministry. They come to view him as one of their own, someone in whom they can confide their problems, turn to for help or advice. His success cannot be gauged by the normal matrices. When Pierre says Mass in the back room of his humble abode, there may only be a handful of people in attendance, but those who are there probably have a more uplifting spiritual experience than they would do in a normal church. After all, the ritual is being performed by a man who works and lives alongside them, who experiences the pain and humiliation of the oppressed and who, unlike the usual representatives of the institutional church, is more concerned with justice and equality than with power and prestige.

Towards the end of the novel, Pierre is summoned to the residence of his bishop to answer some of the accusations that have been levelled at him. His intervention during the trial of a fellow worker had drawn unwelcome attention to his presence in Sagny and he knows that sanctions are inevitable. The cardinal (a barely fictionalised representation of Suhard) who had championed the worker-priests has just died, which means their future is less certain. Pierre explains his actions thus: "Going right to the end, without thinking about yourself, that is what Christ did, what he would do today. It is because he upset the established order that he was crucified. For political reasons, no less!" While his superior

respects Pierre's position, he has no option but to move him from Sagny, where he will be replaced by a younger man of similar convictions.

Sixty years on, I am inclined to think the huge success of Cesbron's novel owed a lot to the unique fascination exerted on the public imagination by the worker-priest movement in France. Equally, I believe its message retains much relevance for today's church leaders as they assess the reasons why so many have ceased practising their religion.

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