

LABOR AND THE CHURCH IN QUEBEC

by

Blair Fraser

[**Note from the editor:** Fraser was one of the most important English-speaking journalist of Canada throughout the 1940's and the 1950's. From his central location in Ottawa, he commented broadly on national affairs. His prose appeared normally in *Maclean's Magazine*. In the article reproduced below, he analyzed the Asbestos strike and its aftermath, especially the impact it had on the Church. The point of view expressed here, especially the vision of Quebec it portrays, was typical of English-speaking writers of the time.]

ONLY 18 months ago the French-Canadian Province of Quebec reelected the provincial Premier, Maurice Duplessis, by a huge majority -- he won 82 of 92 seats in the Legislature. It was a triumph of the extreme Right. Mr. Duplessis is said to have promised, and later did introduce, a labor law that made the Taft-Hartley Act look radical. He is an isolationist not only in world affairs but within Canada -- a violent champion of "provincial rights" who often seems to regard Ottawa as a foreign if not a hostile capital. Altogether, his is probably the only government north of Georgia which not only is reactionary but proud of it.

He was also regarded, in 1948, as the darling of the Quebec Catholic clergy. Although Mr. Duplessis has never been noted for personal piety, he has cultivated the support of the Church with great assiduity and considerable success. The support was by no means unanimous; he has always had powerful opponents in the Quebec hierarchy, notably the liberal Archbishop of Montreal, Monseigneur Joseph Charbonneau. But there is no doubt that among the rank and file of parish priests he was a popular figure, and that this was a major factor in his sensational victory last year.

On the record, this affinity between Mr. Duplessis and the so-called "lower clergy" was not remarkable. Quebec had long been famous as the last remaining pool of cheap and docile labor in North America, and a friendly cure was often helpful in preserving the docility. Workers in the smaller industrial towns were organized, if at all, into well-behaved unions called the Catholic Syndicates. Most of them had originated more as a dike against the alien, godless C.I.O. and A.F.L. unions than as a genuine labor weapon; until a few years ago the typical syndicate was heavily dominated by its chaplain, the parish priest, and the typical chaplain was pretty friendly with the management of the local mill. There used to be a cynical saying among Quebec employers: "Buy a bell for the parish church and you'll never have any labor trouble."

Signs of change had been cropping up, especially in the postwar years. But to friend as well as foe, the Duplessis victory in 1948 seemed a guarantee that change would be arrested, that Quebec would remain as it had been -- if necessary, go back to what it had been. Mr. Duplessis may well have shared this view himself. At any rate he could hardly have expected the startling change that took place within less than a year, as exemplified by these events:

A Catholic Syndicate went through a five-month strike, militantly led by a parish priest -- this in spite of the fact that the strike was illegal under Quebec's labor law, and had been violently denounced by the Duplessis Government.

By unanimous decision of the Quebec bishops, church-door collections in support of the strike were taken each Sunday for the last two months of the fight. In cash it brought the strikers \$167,558, about one-third their total expenditure. In moral support it was invaluable.

Archbishop Charbonneau of Montreal, announcing the strike collection from the pulpit of Notre Dame Church, said "There is a conspiracy to destroy the working class, and it is the Church's duty to intervene."

That was unusual enough, from a reigning archbishop, but Monseigneur Charbonneau had always been known for liberal views. Far more remarkable was the Labor Day sermon of Bishop Desranleau of Sherbrooke, in whose diocese the strike had taken place. Bishop Desranleau had been regarded as a spokesman of the Right. He had last gained notoriety by forbidding his flock to join "neutral" service clubs like Rotary and Kiwanis, lest they be contaminated by outside influences. He above all, one would have supposed, saw the Syndicate movement as a conservative and not a radical force.

On the Sunday before Labor Day, Bishop Desranleau spoke to a Syndicate rally, with the strike padre, Father Louis Philippe Camirand, sitting on the platform beside him. The Bishop said:

Capitalism is the cause of all our miseries. We must work against it -- not to transform it, for it cannot be transformed; not to correct it, for it is incorrigible; but to replace it. The reform of our socio-economic structure will be made through Catholic syndicalism, or through revolution, blood and death . . .

When they tell you our Syndicates are as ill-inspired as the neutral or socialist unions, it's not true. Workers must have a blind confidence in their Syndicates . . .

Men over 60 have seen two world wars and will perhaps see a third, even more unjust, more destructive, between two totalitarian camps -- that of the concentration camp, and that of the American dollar. It is our task to change this situation by implanting the doctrines of the Church . . .

The basic cause is not new -- Pius XI and Pius XII have proclaimed it for all to hear. It is greed. Everyone wants what he has not got. That is why the Popes recommend the virtues of moderation.

But we cannot succeed by the practice of virtue alone, for this is no longer a personal but a social evil. We must have reforms of the socio-economic structure, and no one has the right to dissociate himself from these reforms.

What caused this singular transformation? Why did an acknowledged reactionary, in the strict sense of that misused word, thus address his flock in the language of a militant Socialist?

It was the culmination of a movement that has been going on for some years in Quebec. In Bishop Desranleau's personal case the decisive factor was probably the aforementioned strike in his own diocese, but the real causes of the change -- and of the strike itself -- go back a long way.

On the lay side, the character of the Syndicate movement altered very materially about five years ago. The 376 Syndicates in Quebec and their 82,000 members are organized into the Canadian Confederation of Catholic Labor, and until 1945 the presidency of the Confederation was held by an ardent Duplessis man, a very docile unionist. That year his own secretary, Gérard Picard, led a successful revolt and defeated him with a platform of militant action. The Syndicates have functioned as real, aggressive trade unions ever since.

Instead of regarding C.I.O. and A.F.L. unions as enemies to be hated, the Syndicates now treat them as allies. There is close and often successful cooperation between the Catholic and the international federations. Syndicate ranks have been opened to workers of all faiths. The accent has shifted from the word "Catholic" to the word "labor."

This change on the lay side was a major victory for a kindred faction within the ranks of the clergy. A small but growing minority of Catholic priests had long felt that the Church in Quebec interested itself too little and too late in social questions. They recalled the words of Pius XI: "The great scandal of the nineteenth century was that the Church lost the working class." They believed the Church must regain that support by taking its place at the workingman's side.

Beside him, not in front of him. These clerics are anticlericals of a kind; they oppose and denounce the excessive domination of all activities by the clergy which has been so common in Quebec since the days of New France.

In a pamphlet a few years ago the Very Rev. P. M. Gaudrault, Provincial of the Dominican Order in Quebec, spoke out against this ultra-clericalism with astonishing frankness:

First, it wearies a great many good Catholics, many more than is supposed, who in their own secular domain feel themselves encircled, in tutelage, treated like minors. They want air . . .

Second, it exasperates those other Catholics who are already too much inclined to criticize the Church and the clergy. Unhappily the number of such Catholics is growing continually

Some time ago a Catholic of good education, a man whose work takes him among all ranks of society, said to me, "Father, you don't hear what's being said everywhere, what's cooking in the pot. But people talk freely before me, and the clergy would be frightened if they could hear the talk of some reputedly good Catholics. And this is true from top to bottom of society."

The minority of priests and thinking laymen who share these views have been working for years to change the Quebec picture. Laval University's School of Social Sciences, headed by the Dominican Father Georges-Henri Lévesque, has been a disseminating center of liberal thought and action within the Catholic Church. Its graduates and men whom it has influenced are active in the labor movement, the useful cooperative movement, and in other progressive French-Canadian organizations.

However, as the 1948 election proved, these Catholic liberals were a minority indeed. That is why the 1949 strike at Asbestos, Quebec, was such a milestone in the social history of the province. There seem to be good grounds for believing that the Asbestos strike unified the Quebec clergy in a position somewhat left of center -- at any rate, well to the left of their traditional ultraconservative line.

The Asbestos strike was full of paradox. The employer chiefly concerned, the Canadian Johns-Manville Company, has a good reputation both for wages and working conditions. It pays one of the highest basic labor rates in the province, has a pension scheme and a good health service, runs the best and healthiest plant in the Quebec asbestos industry. When the strike was in its fourth month, one of the strikers told me, "This is the best mine I've ever worked in" -- and he was a man of ten years' experience in various parts of Canada.

Yet the strike was bitter beyond all precedent. It caused the worst outbreak of violence in Quebec labor history. Strikers took control of the town and for 24 hours held it in a state of siege, capturing and manhandling the small detachment of provincial police that tried to maintain order. Next day the police returned in force and carried out retaliations, equally brutal and deplorable, against the strikers.

The reason for the bitterness, and the reason why the bishops' support was unflinching in spite of the strikers' violent outbreak, was the conviction of workers and clergy alike that this was a battle for the survival of the Catholic labor movement.

To the rank-and-file striker it was partly a bread and butter matter. The same man who had such a good word for the Johns-Manville mine, when I asked why he remained on strike, said: "We're fighting for our union. If we lose, the union is smashed, and then we'll have no protection." Too many men in Asbestos remember the days before the union, when grown men worked for as little as 18 cents an hour, and any foreman could fire a man for any or no reason. But even to the rank and file it was more than a mere wage-and-hour battle, it was a crusade.

When the strike was about six weeks old, one striker had a falling-out with the union leaders and decided to go back to work. A day or two later his wife had a visit from a friend.

"What's the matter with your husband?" the visitor asked. "Has he left the Church?"

"Certainly not," said his wife. "He's a good Catholic. Why?"

"But he's gone back to work!" said her friend.

That attitude was general in Asbestos. The strike was a holy war, a battle for the faith. The man who made it so, in the early stages, was Father Louis Philippe Camirand, the parish priest and Syndicate chaplain.

Father Camirand is a short, stout man in his 40's who looks about as radical as Thomas E. Dewey. But he had been a labor chaplain before, and in that capacity went through a bitter textile strike before the war. He came out of it with a passionate conviction that the worker was not getting justice, and that it was the Church's job to help him in his fight for it. At Asbestos, Father Camirand was heart and soul on the union's side, and privy to its most secret councils, from the moment the strike broke out.

Outside the asbestos mining region, the strike got no unusual attention in its opening stages. It was a big strike - 5,000 men out, in two towns 80 miles apart -- and it paralyzed a major export industry. That made it front page news in the French language press. But there was none of the fervor, none of the religious overtone that it acquired later on.

The bishops were not particularly interested in whether or not asbestos workers won the 15-cent increase they were demanding -- too many plants in Quebec paid far less than the 85 cents an hour that unskilled laborers in the asbestos industry were already getting. Archbishop Roy of Quebec City and Archbishop Charbonneau of Montreal, who became the moving spirits of clerical support in the later stages, were not even in Canada during those first weeks; both were in Rome. Had the battle continued on the wage issue, interest in it would never have spread.

But just about the time Monseigneurs Roy and Charbonneau got back from Rome, the union decided to surrender. It offered to send the men back to work on the same terms they had had when they quit (the company had meanwhile given a 10 cent wage increase voluntarily). All it required was a guarantee that strikers would be re-hired without discrimination, and that charges and damage suits arising out of the strike be dropped. These guarantees are routine, in a strike settlement, but at Asbestos they were refused. The Duplessis Government would not agree to drop criminal charges, the company would not agree to re-hire all former employees. It was evident (and by some spokesmen it was even admitted, privately) that both the Government and the company had decided on a fight to a finish.

Syndicate leaders spoke bluntly to the bishops. "If we lose this strike," they said in effect, "the Catholic labor movement is finished. Not only will the members desert it for the C.I.O., but we'll desert it ourselves -- we'll go over to the international unions in a body."

Meanwhile the Canadian Johns-Manville Company had done a very foolish thing. They had had many years' experience with a friendly parish priest, now dead, who was a company shareholder and a close personal friend of their president. This may have given them a false idea of what should and what should not be suggested to the clergy. In any case, company officials saw Monseigneurs Roy and Charbonneau soon after their return from Rome, and intimated pretty bluntly that the archbishops' immediate duty was to order the strikers back to work. Later, the company published

full-page advertisements saying that the Catholic Syndicates had been organized to combat radicalism, and that it was the bishops' duty to purge and curb radicals now. These statements stung the bishops to furious resentment. They regarded such talk as a direct affront, a reflection on the Church's integrity. The net result was a unity among the bishops, from the most liberal to the most conservative, which had never existed before on an issue of this kind.

Premier Duplessis, the erstwhile darling of the clergy, found himself in an awkward position, but he did not retreat. He had already called the Catholic union leaders "saboteurs" and "subversive agents." As Attorney-General of Quebec he had sent his provincial police in to clear away picket lines.

After the bishops had announced their support of the strikers by calling for church-door collections, Premier Duplessis maintained the same attitude as before. Following the outbreak of violence (which took place within a week of the bishops' call for help) he arrested a score of strike leaders on conspiracy charges and appointed his special "labor judge" to try them. He sent a delegation to the Apostolic Delegate in Ottawa, Monseigneur Antoniutti, to ask that the bishops' attitude be forbidden. Monseigneur Antoniutti gave him no cooperation at all, but the Quebec clergy were further annoyed.

It amounted to open collision between the ultra-conservative, ultra-clerical Quebec Government, and the solid phalanx of the Church. It was a change in the social atmosphere of Quebec that might well be called revolutionary. But this is revolution, Quebec style. None of the ordinary clichés apply here -- words like Left, Right and Center are useless to describe what is going on.

You could call the Asbestos strike a victory for the Catholic Left, as in a sense it is. Yet the president of the local Syndicate in Asbestos is a former Fascist, an ex-member of Adrien Arcand's Canadian Fascist Party. His sympathies now lie with the Social Credit Party, which in its Quebec wing has a strong dash of Fascism. Not long ago the Social Credit weekly, *Vers Demain*, devoted a whole issue to eulogy of General Franco and Fascist Spain. The whole Asbestos area voted overwhelmingly for Maurice Duplessis' Government only seven months before the strike.

Communists of Quebec did their best to make capital out of the strike and its concomitant discontent, but they failed utterly. Even the mildly Socialist C.C.F. (Cooperative Commonwealth Federation), Canada's farmer-labor party, has made no headway at all in this section of the Quebec working class, and very little anywhere else. The social ferment at work in Quebec is not expressed in politics.

Just this past autumn, the Catholic Syndicate movement formed its own Political Action Committee after the model of the C.I.O. But there was no agreement as to which party the Catholic P.A.C. should support. It would be against Duplessis -- that much was agreed. Otherwise, it will work on a purely local basis, supporting whatever candidates the syndicate thinks have the best chance of winning, or are likely to prove the best personal friends of labor.

The movement derives its emotional voltage not from politics but from the traditions of the French-Canadian race. Once again, as so often in the past, the French-Canadian feels that he is being mobilized in defense of his faith -- against the foreign heretics who would have crushed the Catholic labor federation. That is a call French Canada has never yet failed to answer. In the present case it is answered with a new vigor, because the defense of the faith coincides with the defense of the humble worker's own interests. Even after such a hard and costly trial, the morale of the Syndicate movement is said to be higher today than ever before.

What the long-term effect will be is anybody's guess. The unity of the clergy in support of the labor movement is somewhat deceptive, because each faction still hopes to establish that unity on its own terms. Some of the priests who backed the strikers are men who accept the motto of Abbé Lionel Groulx -- "*Notre maître, le passé.*" They are the men who hope and intend that Quebec's *collèges classiques* shall not cease to follow the curriculum laid down when the *Séminaire de Québec* was founded in 1663. They are the men who built a Chinese Wall around Quebec, and fight every innovation that might breach that wall.

Allied with them, for the moment, are the men who want to bring Quebec into a working, living alliance with the rest of Canada, who want to see Catholics and Protestants side by side in the fight for social betterment, who want to bring Quebec education into the twentieth century and also to make it available to the whole people, not merely to the 2½ percent who benefit by it now. (The *collèges classiques* are private schools, but are the only road to the university; the public schools lead nowhere.)

Probably neither side will carry its point entirely. Meanwhile, each is helping to sway, but at the same time being swayed by, an upsurge of popular emotion that is bound to bring change. Just what change, in just which direction, it is too soon to tell. But it does appear safe to say that Quebec labor, and indeed Quebec as a whole, will never be quite the same again.

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