

MGR. CHARBONNEAU OF MONTREAL

The Rumours about his Resignation

THE resignation of Mgr. Charbonneau, Archbishop of Montreal, was announced on February 11th, when he was translated to the titular See of Bosphorus. For a fortnight previously he had been in a nursing-home at Victoria, British Columbia, where he still remains, and the announcement said that his resignation was due to ill-health. He is not old, for an Archbishop, being not yet sixty, but for ten years he has been in charge of the largest diocese in the British Empire, and one of the largest in the world. At his Palace on February 9th it was said that he had gone to the nursing home for "a prolonged rest necessitated by overwork and extreme fatigue." As the Catholic weekly, *The Ensign*, said of the resignation:

To many it came as a surprise. But to those of us who had been familiar with the heavy burden, tireless exertions and diversified responsibilities which this exalted office entails, ten years of carrying the burden can be fully and feelingly appreciated.

There were, however, at once people to say that fatigue and ill-health were not the real reasons for the resignation, and that in fact the Archbishop had been virtually deposed because of his "anti-capitalist" attitude during the strike at Asbestos, in the Province of Quebec, which began on February 15th [sic] last year and lasted until July. In America, *Time* circumstantially reported that the Apostolic Delegate to Canada had had to ask him to modify his attitude to labour questions; while in London the *New Statesman* declared:

...He has quietly but steadily opposed the reactionary policies of the Duplessis regime. M. Duplessis and the asbestos magnates now have their revenge. The Archbishop's scarcely veiled dismissal comes after a visit paid to Rome by two of Duplessis's Ministers; and Duplessis, who did his utmost to smash the asbestos strike, is supported by the asbestos companies.

It is true that the Archbishop was sympathetic to the strikers. Special collections for their relief were taken in all churches of his archdiocese on May 1st, after, says the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, "the Sacerdotal Commission for Social Studies, an ecclesiastical advisory body, had appealed for collaboration with the religious authorities in helping the needy families of workers." Similar collections were also taken in the Archdiocese of Quebec. The strikers belonged to the Canadian Catholic Confederation of Labour, and the sympathetic care of the Church for their dependents was not surprising, since the strike was a justifiable one in the judgment of many independent people well qualified to judge.

The story in *Time* about an intervention of the Apostolic Delegate has been very emphatically repudiated in a statement from the Delegate's secretary:

I am commanded by His Excellency Archbishop Antoniutti, Apostolic Delegate to Canada to deny categorically, with reference to *Time Magazine*, February 20th, that he ever asked Archbishop Charbonneau to draw back from his pro-labour

stand, since *he has, on the contrary, always approved and encouraged the very charitable attitude of Archbishop Charbonneau towards all victims of war, of strikes, and of social injustice.*

In other words the Delegate, far from objecting, specifically associated himself with the Archbishop's attitude. Moreover, so far was the Holy See from disapproving, or from siding with "the asbestos magnates," that the *Civiltà Cattolica*, in December, published a detailed and approving study of all that had taken place during the Asbestos strikes, putting it in the setting of the other social work done by the Church in French Canada in recent years. The *Civiltà Cattolica* of the Italian Jesuits is very close to the Secretariate of State, and it is inconceivable that any such action would receive approval there, if at the same time it was so much disapproved of in the Secretariate of State as to necessitate what the *New Statesman* calls the "scarcely-veiled dismissal" of an Archbishop.

Mgr. Charbonneau, as the *Toronto Daily Star* recalled when announcing his resignation, had been "active in Catholic syndicates" and keenly interested in labour problems as a young parish priest in Quebec. Why, it may be asked, was such a man ever chosen to be Archbishop, if the sympathy of Rome is against prelates with such views? Or, if the Roman choice is for such men as he, are we seriously asked to believe that two members of the administration of M. Duplessis, in a brief visit to Rome, could nevertheless, against Rome's better judgment, secure the removal of an Archbishop within a matter of days? As all Governments know, the removal of Archbishops is not so easily to be obtained.

Why, moreover, were other priests who had acquired similar reputations as young men singled out for appointment as Bishops in French Canada -- such men as Mgr. Roy, the Archbishop of Quebec, or Mgr. Desranleau, the Bishop of Sherbrooke? And why was it only Mgr. Charbonneau whose dismissal the "asbestos magnates" secured, when Mgr. Desranleau in particular both played a more prominent part in the strikes and used stronger language in defence of the strikers? As soon as the resignation of Mgr. Charbonneau was announced, Mgr. Desranleau, denying the immediate rumours, said publicly that he for his part had no intention of resigning. Yet the summary of last year's events which appeared in the *Toronto Daily Star* on February 11th, shows that he, much more than his Archbishop, was the man whose resignation the "asbestos magnates" should have sought:

Mgr. Charbonneau was in Rome with Mgr. Desranleau when the Asbestos strike began. When he returned from Rome the strike was two months old. The Canadian Johns-Manville Co. at Asbestos was main focus of a strike in which three out of four companies at Thetford Mines, eighty miles to the north-east [sic] , were also involved. Some 2,500 strikers were demanding 15 cents an hour increase, nine paid holidays, and other benefits. On May 2nd Archbishop Charbonneau told a Notre Dame church congregation in Montreal : 'There is a conspiracy to destroy the working class, and it is the Church's duty to intervene.'

Three days later, led by Father Louis Camirand, Asbestos parish priest and chaplain to the striking Syndicate of Asbestos Workers, the men, acting on rumours that outside workers were being brought into Asbestos, barricaded the community and fought with provincial police.

This was at the time when the company, seeking the intervention of Archbishop Charbonneau and his travelling companion from Rome, Archbishop Roy [of Quebec], on their return from Quebec, had hopes of a settlement. Eight weeks later, workers went back with a ten cents an hour increase and promise of four paid holidays annually.

Two hundred workers were the subject of charges following the fight with police, during which the Riot Act was read.

Bishop Desranleau returned as the strike ended, and gave the strike a blessing at a Labour Day workers' meeting, when he said : 'The primary cause [of misery] is not a new one. Pope Pius XI and Pius XII proclaimed it loudly It is cupidity ...

Capitalism is the cause of all our miseries. We should work to replace it You have started a fight against this menace. You must not back down. You know that to retreat is not Catholic, it is not Canadian, even if it leads to death'.

But Bishop Desranleau still remains in his See. Clearly the situation is not a satisfactory one. There was no advance information that the Archbishop's health was deteriorating. A resignation of that kind is a very unusual happening; the Archbishop was, and is, so popular that a flood of speculation was inevitable. If it could not have been avoided by more careful handling, it should be more fully explained.

Source: Unsigned, "Mgr. Charbonneau of Montreal. The Rumours of his Resignation", in *The Tablet*[London], March 18, 1950, p. 208.