



Francis FEILLET

1912-2003

Francis FEILLET was born on September 26, 1912 at St-Georges de Reintambault in the Ille et Vilaine department. It is a granite country next to the English Channel and very close to Mont St-Michel. His parents were clog-makers, very involved in what was going on in the small town and helping with the liturgy in the parish. He was the second of five children. His older sister Marthe had died when she was 10. He was the last one to leave home a short while after his sister Clotilde's death that had upset him much.

He was a belated vocation (in those days). He did not want to stay in the diocese of Rennes that had so many priests, but was looking for dioceses that had less priests. For a while with Georges Briand he thought of the Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul. Like him he is enchanted by the Sons' community in Paray and by its pastor Fr. Monnier. He joins Georges Briand at the postulate on August 16, 1936 and takes his first vows on February 2, 1938.

He was then dreaming of "*a very high ideal of the priesthood, serving the dechristianized masses*". For him religious life was "*a way to realize his priesthood better.*" He was drafted during the war and soon was a prisoner of war. He renewed his temporary vows faithfully twice (February 1941 and February 1944) while a prisoner, writing and signing with a pencil on small bits of paper these professions made very simply into the hands of the chaplain of the *Komando*.

That chaplain said about him that at first "*he had trouble adapting to the hard tasks, but that through willpower and supernatural spirit he overcame and had a deep influence that some who were already priests could have envied him.*"

Indeed Francis looked upon these years as a prisoner as something necessary. He says about that: "*I left in August 1939 with a faltering Son's vocation; I had no contacts with the Institute, very few contacts with some priests. I had to mature my vocation alone and to accomplish my material, spiritual and apostolic life by myself. I felt the absolute need to hold on to God strongly, simply and intensely. I also felt the need to have a life adjusted to the needs of others: adaptation, understanding, and total charity.*" "*There I also made the experience of a true team life based on charity with the most different men.*"

These years of captivity increased even more his demanding desire of a "*total priesthood.*" And on the eve of his perpetual vows on August 2, 1945, on his return from captivity, he mentions, through abrupt loyalty, his deceptions before the war, his aversion for unsuited and ill lived religious life that "*belittles the priesthood*". And if in spite of his deceptions and fears about the Institute he still asked to make his perpetual profession, it is because of the changes and the new spirit that he sensed on his return from captivity, and mostly among the scholastics he met and his new relationship with the General Superior, André Monnier. There is no doubt that those six years of captivity have been decisive in forming the Son of Charity that he became.

Ordained a priest on April 5, 1947 he was first appointed to Argenteuil. Then from 1948 to 1952, he goes with the “trailer” for the “workers parish missions”. There with Pierre Thivollier and Pierre Dupé, he will live intensely what he had been looking for in the Institute, a radical, community and missionary priesthood close to the dechristianized crowds. That period of great enthusiasm would always remain dear to him.

Then he was in Draveil from 1952 to 1959, then in Bezons from 1959 to 1966 and at Vélizy, a new city and a new challenge from 1966 to 1979.

In 1979, he was in charge of our house at Le Rayol. Then he had heart problems and came back to the diocese of Versailles, first at Maule in 1983, then at Queues les Yvelines in 1989 when he was 77. He stayed there until 2001, when he came to St. Joseph House.

All through that long life of active ministry he remained faithful to his youthful wishes of a radical life, tied to God and adapted to the needs of contemporary men.

He has been faithful all his life to daily mass, the breviary and prayer. He was great in liturgies and para-liturgies that he would lead in a very warm way and close to the life of the people. He wanted very much that it be beautiful. For he was an amateur of art, mostly paintings. Many of our communities own a figure of Christ or of Mary that he has “discovered” somewhere.

According to one of his past vicars he had that passion of Fr. Anizan’s “*to give back to the souls and the people the true meaning and the great understanding of Christianity.*”

He was intelligent, had an open mind, a great culture, he read very much: arts, novels, history, philosophy and theology. His appetite for reading embraced all the daily events especially books that looked at the evolution of the society and the Church. He was a humanist, open to all that was human, concerned about the adaptation of the Church to the present world.

All through his life he has put on the road to Christ many youths.

Lover of Jesus Christ, direct, he was a man of discernment. He was a seeker and awakener of vocations: activists that he got involved in evangelization, young men and women that he oriented to religious or priestly life. Many Sons owe him their vocation: Pierre, Félix, Jim...

With a paternal affection and a very faithful friendship he accompanied crowds of persons. First of all he has been the brotherly confident of many priests that he knew how to welcome, counsel and understand.

He knew how to provoke a dialogue and open roads of spiritual liberation. But his sense of provocation could also make some suffer, because he could put into the total light his interlocutor and put his fingers on his wounds.

The rough frankness was tempered by a sensitivity capable of tenderness toward some, especially young couples looking for a meaning for their live or going through hard times.

A woman, parishioner of La Queue, writes: *“The word ‘spiritual father’ took all its meaning when we met. **Father:** the one who loves you, guides you, greets you, sends you. **Spiritual:** for his faith in man, in any man, any woman, any child, was not only a deeply rooted hope but a call to live our humanity as truly as possible.”... “So many young couples, men and women have come to him, and have kept on, reconciled with the face of a living and welcoming Church. Our couple has been consolidated, reassured, made stronger by him.”*

He had a special attention for all those, who outside the structures of the Church or having difficulties with the institution, were living a genuine and profound human quest. He maintained his contacts and a faithful correspondence with them. His absolute character, cut and dried, felt attracted to persons extreme in the gift of themselves to Christ like that hermit woman who was among his best friendships and relationships.

He was sensitive to a brotherly welcome of others and just recently his table was opened for his many friends, believers or not, wishing to gather people together in order to share together. And also for his family and his nephews and grand-nephews and grand-nieces for whom he was tied by a great affection.

While he was in Vélizy, our internal debates (parishes and worker-priests, internationalization) and the fact that some Sons were leaving put him somehow on the sideline toward the Institute. It was not a rupture. He kept his many friends, accompanied some of them and he would express his advice and his thoughts. For in spite of some caustic critics, he profoundly loved the Instituted and was concerned about its future. Just as he loved the Church, while suffering from it not being adapted.

He died in the night from Saturday to Sunday, on the Sunday of the Good Shepherd and of vocations. It is more than a symbol.

For the last two years, repeated heart attacks, and the recent death of his sister were preparing him for that event. Until the last minute he kept an extremely alert mind, going on discussing of all the topics that had always concerned him: Church, world and the Institute. A woman parishioner writes: *“The last meeting revealed to us a tired body out of breath. But he was still in his mission: to help us find our place in the community, to remain on the watch and available for those who are on the margin, to be witnesses of that Jesus who had constantly called him in his life.”*

He went peacefully after having gathered for the last time his nephews and nieces.

Regional Council of France

Translated by *Lorenzo Lortie fc*